

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

JUL-SEPT 2022

voice

of Persecuted Christians

**HELPING
THE FAMILIES
OF CHRISTIAN
MARTYRS**

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



Welcome

by Paul Robinson, CEO

Be inspired by
their example

Even in the context of the horror of killing that has been going on in northern Nigeria for a number of years, the death of Christian student Deborah Yakubu stands out. Her murder shocked many people around the world. And not surprisingly. Apparently all she did was refuse to go on a date and would not retract a social media statement thanking Jesus for her exam results. For that she was brutally slain while, we understand, police officers stood by and watched.

Hers is not the only upsetting story to come out of Nigeria recently. As you can read in our feature on page 6 the presence of Christians in the region is becoming an existential matter.

Given all this and the seeming unending violence meted out to Christians by terrorists and heavily armed militants over the years it would be easy to despair.

However, that is not the end of the story. With amazing bravery and disregard for their own safety Christian evangelists are taking the gospel into the very remote blood-stained lands of northern Nigeria. Rather than be deterred by the evil in their country, they are facing it head-on. (Find out more on page 6.)

Praise God for raising up those willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice for the faith. We thank God for them; we pray for them and we support our partners as they equip these brave ministers of the gospel.

In this edition of *Voice*, we focus on the families

of Christian martyrs such as in Nigeria as well as prisoners of faith. In China, the church is refusing to bow to the demands of an authoritarian state, and suffering the consequences. But it keeps going. With its pastor in prison and members under 24-hour surveillance you would think the Early Rain congregation would have given up. Nothing of the sort. As Titus Wu says on page 18, the church is seeing tremendous growth in China in the face of increasing oppression. That's because the church at large refuses to roll over. As our partner Pavel says in our Ukraine feature on page 10: 'The time of crisis is the time of the greatest opportunities'. That's what the church in Nigeria and the church in China and in other places where it is persecuted has come to understand.

• I'm delighted to say that one of our Nigeria partners, Dr Ben Kwashi, the Archbishop of Jos, will be speaking via Zoom at the Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast on July 5 as well as at the Bangor convention in August (see page 20), updating us all on the situation in Nigeria.

THANK YOU

Finally a huge thank you to Rev Robert de Berry and his team for the amazing cycle ride undertaken in May and June to raise funds for persecuted Christians; and to all those churches that took part in our All Out for God event in May and those commemorating the Day of the Christian Martyr on June 29.

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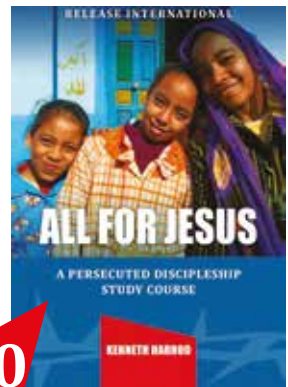
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Release helps Christians in the UK and Ireland to actively engage with their persecuted brothers and sisters around the world: praying with them, standing with them, helping them, and learning lessons of true Christian discipleship with them.

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FUNDRAISING
REGULATOR

Faith under fire



Newfound freedom for Kyrgyz Christian

Thank God that a Christian from Kyrgyzstan, who was imprisoned by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and tortured in a Xinjiang concentration camp, has found freedom in the US.

With his wife and 11-year-old son beside him, Ovalbek Turdakun (pictured) praised God for his family's newfound freedom as they stepped foot in their new homeland.

An ethnic Kyrgyz, Ovalbek was detained in 2018 by CCP officials who claimed he stayed too long in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. He endured numerous interrogations.

Ovalbek was released later in 2018 and went with his family to Kyrgyzstan in 2019 where they were kept safe until they could travel to the US.

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Chinese authorities extend religious clampdown

At the beginning of June new measures came into effect that place church finances into the hands of the authorities. Decisions on the use of registered church finances and buildings will no longer be able to be made by the churches themselves.

This latest clampdown follows a ban on using the word 'Christ' on the internet which came into force in the spring.

The authorities picked up on the use of the word Christ in a WeChat post published by the Early Rain Covenant Church – a regular target for the Chinese authorities.

The church's WeChat account ran a book review group where members recommended book titles and voted on their favourites.

But WeChat's censorship team, prompted by new government regulations, fired back the following:

'The word "Christ" you are trying to publish violates regulations on Internet Information Services, including, but not limited to the following categories: pornography, gambling, drug abuse, incitement.'

The only way the church administrator could get away with using the word Christ online was to substitute part of the word.

A partner of Release International warns: *'The Chinese government has dramatically tightened its control on religion.'*

The ban prevents any organisation or individual from posting religious information on the Internet without first obtaining the permission of their provincial government. It bans religious groups, schools and organisations without valid permits from conducting online sermons.

Anyone performing online religious activities without a licence 'shall be listed as untrustworthy individuals or organisations'.

Persecuted church couple marry

Despite several attempts by the Chinese authorities to sabotage their attempts to get married, Early Rain Covenant Church members Zhang Qiang and Xiao Yue were finally able to wed.

The couple had to pick another venue for their wedding after Chengdu Municipal police canceled their wedding twice. They moved their wedding to the evening of May 24 but the owner of the wedding venue had to cancel their reservation because of pressure from the police.

Christians at the church, which has been relentlessly persecuted by the authorities, helped the couple find a wedding venue in Wenjiang, so they tentatively rescheduled their wedding to the afternoon of May 24. Minister Dai Zhichao,



who was supposed to officiate at the wedding, could not make it because he was being watched by national security officers. Elder Li Yingqiang could not attend for the same reason, so he and Dai joined online. Dai officiated, and Li opened the ceremony with prayer.

Few members of the church could attend the wedding in person due to police obstruction, but our partner, ChinaAid, reports that the entire wedding was 'filled with God's presence and grace'.

(Source: ChinaAid)

Listen to our latest podcasts



Ukraine, Russia and Central Asia
Release International partner Pavel from Ukraine talks about the current situation in Ukraine and how the war has prompted churches to pray and serve with a new urgency. Pavel shares his story of growing up in the Soviet Union where being arrested and imprisoned was a common occupational hazard for Christian pastors. And we talk about Pavel's ongoing work today supporting persecuted Christians in Central Asia who are determined to reach out in a hostile context.

A captive story While travelling to a conference in October 2020, Nigerian pastor Rev Polycarp Zongo was kidnapped by the terrorist group Islamic State West Africa Province. He was held for 7 months before he was eventually released. Listen in as Rev Polycarp bravely recounts his ordeal and tells how God has used the experience to build his faith.

Making room for the gospel
Release International CEO Paul Robinson, who recently visited one of our ministry partners in East Africa, outlines the challenges that believers from a Muslim background face in that part of the world, and about the creative provisions our partners have put in place to support them. You'll hear about an iman who came to faith; about a woman who learned about love; and about how all of this can encourage you in your own faith.

Our topical Voice podcasts are available from releaseinternational.org/podcast or via your favourite podcast app.

Children killed in Nigeria church attack

The killing of Christians in Nigeria is continuing at an alarming rate. At the time of writing at least 50 people were reported to have died and more than 70 injured in a terrorist attack on a church in Ondo State in southern Nigeria.

It is understood that a large number of children were among those who lost their lives in the attack on St Francis Church in Owo in June.

Gunmen, said to be of Fulani origin, reportedly threw explosives into the building before opening fire just as the Pentecost service was finishing.

Although it is understood that the attack lasted 20 minutes and could be heard from another nearby church, police officers stationed close to the area failed to respond.

The Christian Association of Nigeria described the violence as 'raw persecution' and called on the Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari, to find a lasting solution to 'the unending killings in the country'.

Separately six Christians were reported to have been murdered in the first terrorist attack of its kind in Nigeria's eastern Taraba state.

After an explosion killed the six believers and wounded more than a dozen others at a Christian-owned market on April 19, Islamic State West Africa Province released a statement admitting that it had detonated the explosive at 'a gathering of infidel Christians', according to local reports.

A week later militant Fulani herdsmen were among those who attacked four villages in the northern Kaduna state, killing 18 Christians and burning down 92 houses, it was reported. Kaduna has witnessed horrific violence against Christians in recent weeks.

• **Please pray for the church in Nigeria following these latest attacks.**

Boost for Egyptian believers

Around 240 churches and places of worship in Egypt have been granted legal status.

The decision by the government committee that oversees the legalisation of churches brings to 2,401 the number that have been granted legal status since the committee began its mandate in 2017.

In Egypt, churches must apply for legal status for their buildings, which in the past had to be approved by the security agencies.

A few days after the committee's decision, nine Coptic Christians were released from prison. The group were provisionally arrested in January after taking part in protests demanding permission to rebuild a church in Minya, which was destroyed in suspicious circumstances in 2016.

Our partner in Egypt said: 'Things are certainly much better now than they were, and the President's release of the nine detained Christians is definitely a positive step that we pray is a sign of even further progress in the near future.'

More arrests in Eritrea

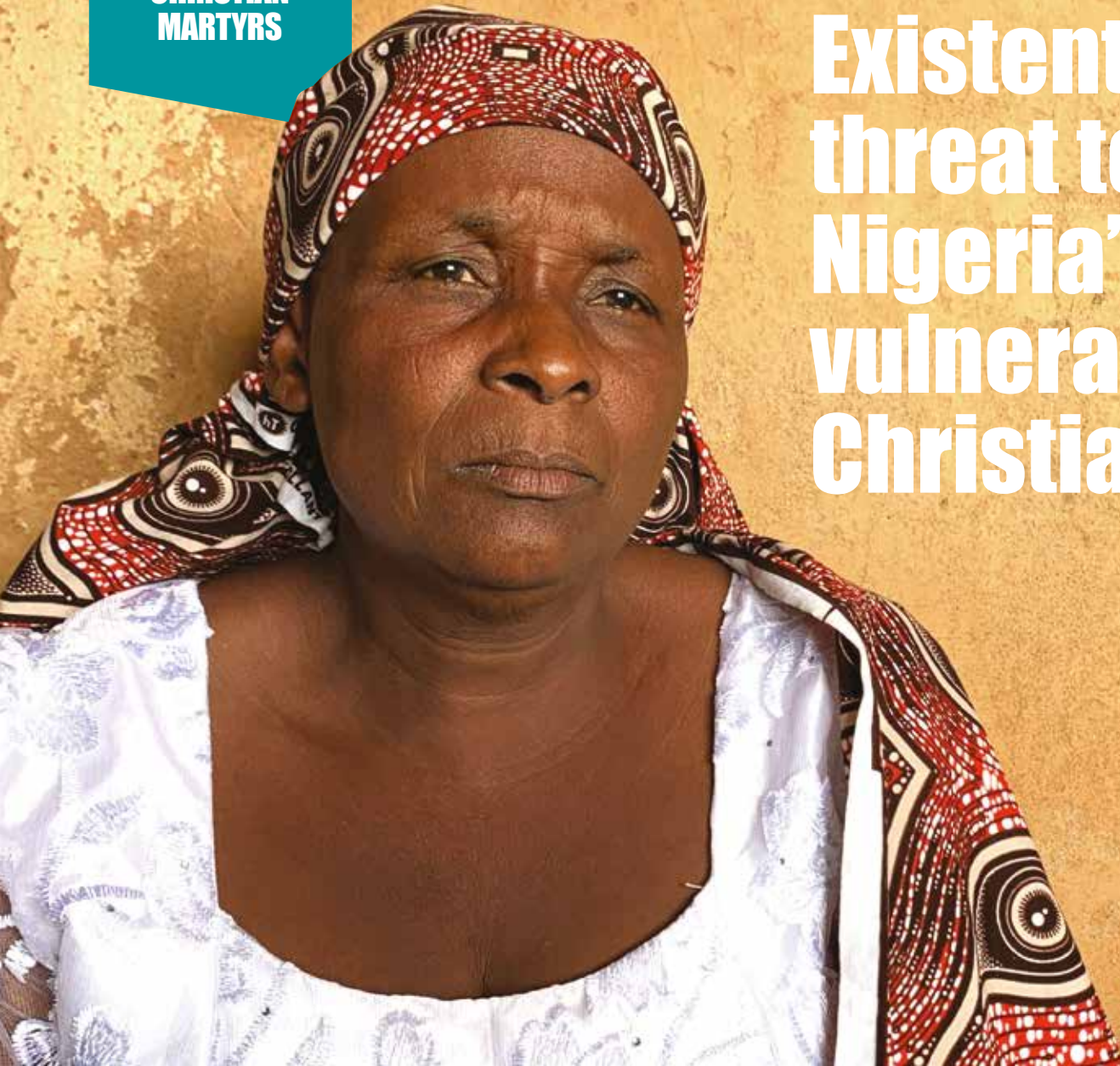
A total of 17 Christians were arrested in the Eritrean capital of Asmara at the end of May. The group of 11 women and six men, who were at a prayer meeting, were taken to Mai Serwa prison. It is understood that an informant in one of the nearby houses had contacted the authorities.

Since around the end of last year about 70 to 80 Christians have been arrested including church leaders; 15 were rearrested. There are now about 250 believers in prison.

Our partner said: 'The government does not appear to have changed its policy. Fear is their main tool. Even those they release they don't want them to feel free.'

• **In the last edition of Voice, we asked you to pray that aid would get through to those in need in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia and that there would be an end to the conflict. Our partner recently reported that a temporary truce had been declared and the Ethiopian Government was allowing food aid to get through.**

Existential threat to Nigeria's vulnerable Christians



Fearless believers in Nigeria are paying the ultimate price for sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ, reports Kenneth Harrod

Reverend Ibrahim Isa has won many people for Christ – and was determined to continue preaching despite threats to his life. Now he has paid the ultimate price for his Lord.

Ibrahim and his wife Laraba, along with their five children, lived in a village not far from Jos, in Nigeria's Plateau State. Laraba and the children had been staying in Jos on the morning her husband was killed by Fulani militants.

'I called him at about 6.30 am and asked if he was okay and he said he had slept well. I asked him about the village and he said all was fine. He said he was going out that morning to plant some wheat on the farm. He said a friend had called him and they were going to the farm to do some planting. I said, "okay", and prayed that God would protect him,' said Laraba.

About a quarter of an hour later she received a phone call from a church member, calling her to the village. 'He

said I should come immediately. I said, "But I just spoke to him a moment ago." He repeated that I should just come right away.' On the way, and fearing the worst, she called a friend who confirmed that her husband had been killed.

'It seems that while I was speaking to my husband on the phone the killers

'He had been warned several times that he was possibly going to be a target.'

were already there waiting for him. When I got there what I saw was that it seemed they had attacked him in the



Laraba: 'I know my husband is at rest with the Lord'

room; he had tried to escape through the window – and as he fled they shot him dead. I saw his body lying where he was shot,' Laraba explained.

Like many Nigerian Christians in rural areas, Ibrahim was in the habit of sleeping outside at night, as this is often considered safer than sleeping in homes which may be targets for attack.

'They specifically came for him,' Laraba continued. 'He came [to their home] in the morning to get ready to go to the farm and it seems they followed him and killed him.'

Ibrahim was a pastor from a Fulani background. He served as

an evangelist in the Kpachudu community near Jos, working among Fulani Muslim groups and seeing many come to faith in Christ. A community leader told a Release International partner, 'He had been warned several times that he was possibly going to be a target for killing by the Fulani Islamist militias ravaging the villages in Miango.

'But Ibrahim said that he had a duty to preach and bring the gospel to his people.'

When asked how she can be prayed for, Laraba said, 'As long as you are a Christian, you know that someday we will leave this world. I know my husband is at rest with the Lord. I know also the Lord will be with me and provide what I need for these children's needs.

'But my biggest challenge now is where to stay. Because the house where my husband was killed was our

'Ibrahim said that he had a duty to preach and bring the gospel to his people.'

home. We bought it and built it. It was a place where my husband built his ministry and where we held meetings with missionaries.'

Two years ago we reported a similar targeted killing. Matthew Tagwi had been serving as a pastor near Miango for just three months when Fulani militants attacked his village. They went to his house, called him out by name and shot him. At the time his pregnant wife, Rose, was in another town for an antenatal check-up.

After the incident Rose – already a mother of two young daughters – spoke powerfully of her prayer that her husband's killers would come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Rose subsequently gave birth to another daughter, who she named Patience. However, our partner told us recently that sadly the child later died.

'The trauma and challenges facing Rose in a village which is constantly

CEASELESS ATTACKS

As we spoke to our partner about Ibrahim and Laraba's story he informed us of another targeted attack by Fulani militants in May in which six people were murdered. It was the second time that their village, Gora Gan, had been attacked. Many locals had fled the area and were taking refuge in neighbouring communities.

'The attacks and killings are ceaseless now. In April this year, Boko Haram executed 20 Christians in an online video, posted on a website, to send a message and avenge the killing of one of its leaders in the Middle East.

'As a Release International partner I would say that the situation Christians find themselves in in Nigeria today is dire. It is fast becoming more of an existential matter for many Christian communities in central Nigeria. It is apparent, much more now, with government complacency, manipulation of electioneering processes and rising terrorism by ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province) and Islamist Fulani cattle herders militia that Christians are likely to face persecution for a long time to come.'

He added: 'We ask for prayers for God to raise men and women who will continue to stand for the Church and be voices for the vulnerable. We ask for prayers for God to raise men and women who will fight for justice for the victims of this religious carnage and slow the genocide unfolding in northern Nigeria.'



Our partner has been offering Rose pastoral counsel and support

under threat and where people are always running to the bushes at night or sleeping in another relatively safer village then walking back to their houses the next morning often takes its toll,' he said.

Rose told him: *'It has been hard to live as a single mother with two children and to have to go to farm and then*

'I am so excited about the enthusiasm of the pastors... to bring the love of Christ.'

take the children to school. If Matthew were still alive it would not have been so hard.'

Our partner has been offering Rose pastoral counsel and support.

In the past year, he noted, there have been a number of church leaders and pastors specifically targeted by Islamist groups in central Nigeria. Some have been killed while others have been kidnapped for ransom payment.

However, that has not deterred Christians from continuing to share the gospel in the most dangerous of circumstances. One of the projects Release International supports in Nigeria actually involves strategic training to equip church leaders and evangelists to take the message of Christ into areas most ravaged in recent years by Islamist violence.

Our partner told us: *'The pastors training is going very, very well. I am so excited about the enthusiasm of the pastors, and their commitment to*

bring hope, to bring the love of Christ, and to continue to stand with their congregations and communities.'

- **Please pray for Laraba, for Rose and for other Christian widows, whose faithful husbands have been targeted and killed because of their gospel ministry. Pray that the Lord will sustain them and provide for them.**
- **Also pray for the strategic training of pastors by our partner and for effective gospel outreach in central and northern Nigeria.**



Population: 219 million

Capital: Abuja

Government: Federal presidential republic

Religion: Muslim 53.5%, Christian 45.9% (to 51.3%), Other 0.6%

Sources: World Factbook, Operation World.

'POLICE STOOD BY AS STUDENT SLAIN'

WARNING: CONTAINS GRAPHIC DETAIL

On May 12, Christian college student Deborah Emmanuel Yakubu (pictured, Facebook) was beaten and stoned to death. Her killing in the northern Sokoto state shocked many Christians in Nigeria, including our partners, and around the world.

Following the arrest of two suspects for her murder in Sokoto, the state capital, rioters started bonfires and damaged churches including an Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) building in Sokoto and looted and damaged Christian-owned shops, area residents said.

Deborah was beaten and then stoned to death after being falsely accused of blaspheming Islam's prophet Mohammed because she had refused to date a Muslim, according to sources. Her body was then set on fire.

Local media reported that Deborah had said in a class WhatsApp chat group that she had passed exams thanks to Christ, and when she was pressured to retract the statement and apologise, she declined.

Our partners were 'shocked but not surprised' at Deborah's murder.

'What was most curious in the killing of Deborah was that more than a dozen policemen watched as she was battered to death but did nothing to stop the murder,

and the Nigerian President Buhari simply pointing out that "Muslims demand respect for Islam".

'The disdain for Christians in Nigeria by fundamentalists and radical Muslims continues to grow as the violence increases.

The interesting development from the killing of Deborah is the support for the murder by many prominent politicians, Islamic scholars and imams.'

He added: *'There have been killings of Christians in the past on the simple accusation of blasphemy by young Muslim boys who, we are very sure, do not even read or understand the Koran. It has happened in Gombe, Zaria, Kano and Zamfara states at one time or the other.'*

He said that another girl who had made an angry response to the killing of Deborah was now *'being sought to be killed by angry youths in Maiduguri [in the northern Borno state]'*.



Please help families of martyrs around the world

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

Your gift could:

- Support trauma-healing workshops
- Provide food and other essentials for survivors of attacks
- Provide direct support to widows and orphans

To make a gift please use the enclosed form, call 01689 823491 or give online at releaseinternational.org



NO DESPAIR!

Ukrainian Christians' message of hope

Four months on from the Russian invasion we caught up with our partner Pavel, who is based in Ukraine, to find out how believers are responding to the war*

Q: *In our last magazine we highlighted the restrictions on churches in areas under Russian separatist control. Since the war began has the situation deteriorated further?*

A: Like the rest of the population, many evangelicals have left Ukraine because of the war, and they are dispersed across neighbouring countries. It is a miracle of the Lord that Western borders have been opened so freely and Ukrainians have experienced such generous hospitality.

Around 90 per cent of the Christians in Mariupol were able to escape. In other cities such as Kyiv some more have remained, and churches have been gathering for daily prayer.

In the areas under Russian separatist control the situation is the same as before. Many evangelicals had already been forced out and some who left the regions were not allowed to return. Church buildings were confiscated, and evangelical Christians are not officially permitted to gather, although some have been able to continue

meeting in homes. Positively, however, the upheaval of the war has made it possible for some Christians in newly occupied areas of the country to reconnect in fellowship with Christians in the separatist areas.

What is the message coming out of the church in Ukraine?

The Ukrainian people have a strong belief and hope for the future of their country. Many Ukrainian men who were working outside the country have returned to fight. People who have left because of the war are expecting to come back.

Ukrainian Christians have a strong faith. They are praying to God every day and they expect that their prayers will be answered. Although



Stock photo

despair. Christians are a special sort of people who always have a hope.

Are Christians concerned about what will happen if Russia takes control over parts of Ukraine?

I do not believe this will happen but if it does it will only be for a short time. I believe that occupied areas will be given back. The invasion is Putin's vision but too many Russians have too much invested in the West and the sanctions are hurting them. And of course, there is God. Ukrainian Christians are expecting that God will do something in answer to our prayers.

Were Ukrainians fearful of a Russian invasion even before 2014?

Yes, we always expected something like this would happen. We knew that the partitioning of eastern regions eight years ago was only the start of Putin's plans. Even when the Soviet Union collapsed more than 30 years ago and we experienced real freedom, some Christians left Ukraine because they anticipated it would only be a short window of freedom. Some evangelicals including my own father always believed that Russia would return and attempt to re-establish an empire.

What impact has the war had on believers Release International supports in Central Asia?

We are still able to support them, but there are more challenges. It is no longer possible for them to travel to Ukraine for meetings, training and fellowship, and it is much more difficult for us to travel to Central Asia. We are still able to communicate daily, but they are more isolated than before.

What impact will this war have on the church in Ukraine and the wider region?

More than five million people have left Ukraine but, when the war ends, I suspect that not everyone will return. But this gives an opportunity to existing Ukrainian diaspora churches across Europe. They will become more active, especially in reaching out to their own dispersed people.

After the war is over Ukraine will

be a changed country. Those who return will bring new ideas and new expectations. They will want to improve living standards and introduce new technologies.

Christians can also bring back new ideas. I am praying that the church will benefit from new ideas about mission and outreach.

What does the future hold for believers in Russia?

I believe they will experience increasing oppression. But this is not necessarily a bad thing. Unfortunately, some Russian Christians have been manipulated by Putin's propaganda, even some evangelicals. They have been tempted by a comfortable lifestyle and they need to ask themselves where their true loyalty lies. Too many are currently neutral and not bold enough to speak up against the regime. However, for a Christian, there comes a time when you have to stand up, when saying nothing is no longer an option.

How can we pray for Christians in Ukraine and Central Asia?

Please pray for peace, but not at any price. People need to know that freedom does not come automatically, it can be costly. Up until this point Ukrainians may not have appreciated their freedom enough.

Please pray for the church, especially in terms of outreach and evangelism. Local churches have to understand that the time of crisis is the time of the greatest opportunities. Christians need wisdom to know how to use the time wisely. Today the most important thing is to show compassion and help people with their practical needs – this is the most understandable sermon. This will impact communities and prepare the ground for evangelism.

**Not his real name*

LATEST PODCAST

Hear Pavel talk more about Ukraine and Central Asia in our June Voice podcast (see page 5 for more details).



'We have left but we haven't arrived'

Despite forsaking everything to follow Christ many Somali believers find the church in their new homelands unwelcoming and distrustful. However, thanks to your support, our partners are able to provide them with vital practical and spiritual care, writes Release International's Ben Gardner

If you mention the word 'safari' (or 'safar' as it is known in Somalia) it no doubt conjures up images of Land Rovers rolling across the African plains with excited tourists taking photographs of the native wildlife.

However, the Swahili word 'safari' more accurately means 'journey', which turns out to be how our brothers and sisters who have escaped Somalia often refer to their

walk of faith with Jesus. They all use a similar expression: *'We have left but we haven't arrived.'*

Despite committing their lives to Christ, and fleeing their Muslim families, they are not yet welcomed by fellow believers and in fact many are distrusted.

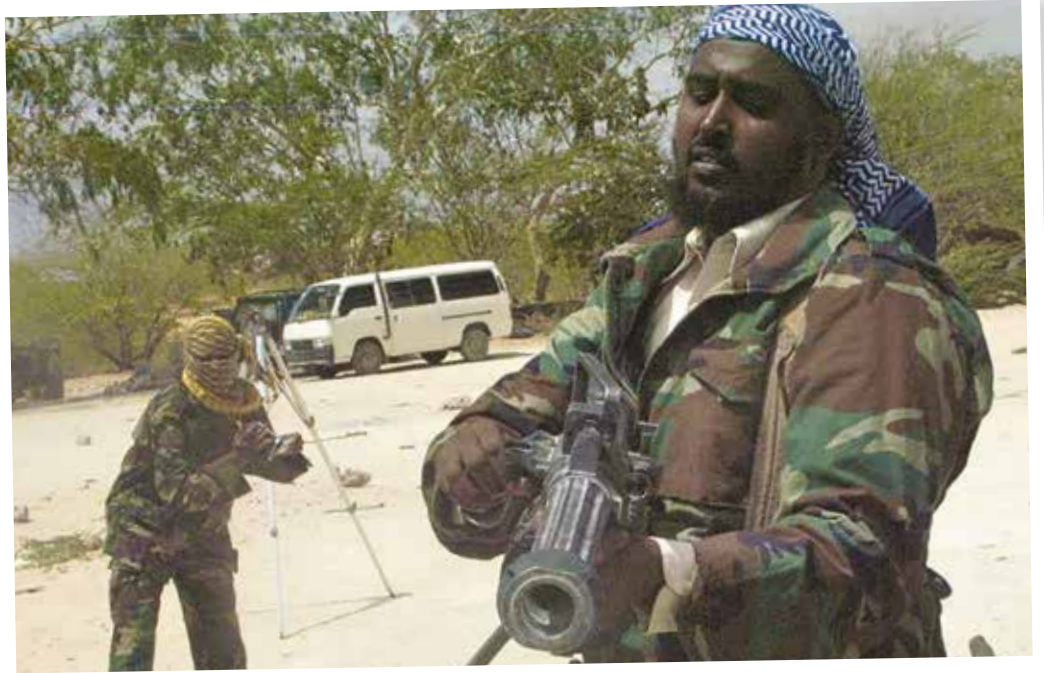
Recently we met 'Lula', who had to leave her family after coming to

know Jesus. Her father publicly said, *'I'm not afraid of going to jail; if you see her, kill her.'* She fled to another country, but her brothers followed her there.

Forced to hide in a house for months on end, she lived with the realisation that she could be found at any moment. However, while praying one day, she felt the Lord ask her how long she would hide from human beings.

Suitably convicted, she left the house and went to the market where she met her brother. As expected he threatened her, but she told him that she would scream if he tried anything. As a result she was able to walk away unharmed; but more than that, she was able to testify that God delivered her from fear of human beings that day.

However, Lula's family continued to



Terrorist group al-Shabaab have targeted Somalis who turn to Christ

apostle Paul and how distrustful the early believers were of his conversion. Meeting our partner 'Abdul' changed all that for Lula, just as meeting Ananias led to Paul's acceptance in Acts chapter 9.

With the support of Abdul and his team Lula now has a job providing milk for local schools. The team also helped to rebuild her house and bring her into a community of like-minded believers. They meet regularly, and she is now taking a leadership role herself.

In fact Lula is even helping to translate the Bible into her mother tongue so that her countrymen might be able to read it. However, the work she is doing is raising her profile again. *'I know what this is going to cost me, but He has been with me through all my journey and in my bad times.'*

'God used al-Shabaab'

Another Somali who has been helped by our partners is Pastor 'Samuel', who as an imam came to know Jesus through the work of a missionary doctor in 1987.

After telling his father that he had come to faith in Jesus, he was tied up and then held in an underground cell

until a group of believers were able to free him. He fled the country and over time began a new life, marrying, having children and serving his local

'Somalia used to be a closed door, but... now there is space for them to hear the gospel.'

church as a pastor and evangelist. As a result of his teaching ministry many Muslims in his new homeland came to know the Lord.

But his story did not end there.

A Somali group tracked him down, and offered his wife thousands of pounds to take his children away from him. She agreed and left Samuel, moving back to Somalia. He told us: 'It was only after then that things really started!' Following an open-air religious debate he was beaten and left for dead and, after the terrorist group al-Shabaab discovered his whereabouts, a fatwa was declared against him. Sadly even his church began to abandon him out of fear, but, with obvious gratitude he declared: *'The Lord helped me.'*

Continued overleaf...

'Andrea'

pursue her, and one day she returned home to find her house had been demolished, with all her belongings taken.

In spite of all the hostility from her family, she told us of her great love for them, and a passion to see them come to know Jesus. She has continued to reach out to them and, when her father died, she found a way to go to the funeral, despite the risk to her own life.

Lula shared the impact of meeting our partners. Until that point, she had been struggling to make a living, as well as to become part of a community. As a Muslim-background believer (MBB) as well as coming from a different country, she told us the local churches distrusted her, believing she was either a spy or a terrorist. It reminded us of the



Release International team members pray with Somali Christians many of whom have been rejected by their families and communities

In an effort to seize Samuel, al-Shabaab began to publish his story on billboards and even showed a YouTube video of him in various marketplaces. *‘The most wonderful thing was that God was using that to preach the gospel; they were preaching the gospel to those I could never reach!’*

For Samuel it was a challenging time, living alone and in hiding, unable even to attend church.

‘Every time I am persecuted, I see the Lord’s hand moving in the midst of it.’

However, Abdul and his team were able to help, befriending him and offering support, protection and friendship.

When the immediate risk to his life had passed, Samuel began to rebuild the community of Muslim-background

believers (MBBs). He was acutely aware of MBBs who had ‘left but not arrived’, and he strongly felt that discipleship of these new believers was essential to ensure they were not lost through loneliness and isolation. He actually had a young believer living with him when we visited, a man whose conversion had led to his wife and children leaving him.

‘I will share my house and my food with our brothers who come to me; we want a safe place where our brothers can feel loved, and know that they have a family and a community,’ Samuel said.

‘Somalia used to be a closed door, but now it is much more open. People are hungry. They are tired of war. They have been shaken, and now there is space for them to hear the gospel.’

‘When I see my community suffering, I must help them. Furthermore, every time I am persecuted, I see the Lord’s

hand moving in the midst of it.’

Please pray for Samuel’s safety and protection and for his efforts to disciple MBBs.

‘Evil’ religion

The journey of faith began for ‘Amanda’ when she heard of Muslim women in her community who had converted to Christianity. She had always been taught that Christianity was an evil religion, and that Christians were mean. As a result she was passionate to ‘win them back’.

However, when she met these women, and a foreign doctor who spoke her native language, she was confused. These people were generous and kind.

She was also amazed that she did not need to learn a new language to find out about their God – *‘In Islam, Allah only speaks Arabic. Here is a*

God who is willing to speak to me in my mother tongue.'

Eventually, Amanda built up the courage to tell her husband that she had been meeting with Christians. She asked him if he would like to go along to meet them but he forced her into the shower and told her to wash. 'You've been to a dirty place,' he said angrily.

Despite her husband's reaction, she decided to meet the Christians again; it was then that she gave her life to Christ. When she returned home, her husband was waiting for her. He beat her and locked her in a room. He even stopped her from seeing her son.

After a year of being mistreated, he finally left her; she was alone, grateful that the abuse had stopped but now without a job or a home.

Despite this, she said, she came to know that God loved her, and that He cared for her: *'In Islam, even our husbands never tell us they love us, but here is God telling me that He loves me!'*

Our partners have helped her to set up a shop so she can make a living. And, despite great risk, she reaches out to women in the Muslim community in the hope that she can lead some to Christ.

Because the local churches are afraid of MBBs and tend to shun them, while their families either want to harm them or have nothing to do with them, the support and community our partners offer these 'underground' believers are crucial. Through your prayers and financial support, they are helping them to *'safari njema'* or *'journey well'*.

• **Abdul and his team, in addition to supporting believers on the ground, also have many projects for reaching out into Somalia, including radio and social media. Please pray for the growth of this ministry and its impact.**

**Names in inverted commas have been changed to protect identities*



A personal safari

Like most Christians in the UK I have never really experienced persecution for being a Christian – perhaps a bit of teasing or a raised eyebrow but no hostility on the scale that believers in other countries go through. In fact, until recently, I had not particularly suffered at all.

However, following a recent acute loss, which was unexpected and severe, I learnt a very important lesson: pain and suffering hurt but they cannot destroy us – we survive.

Before I went through my recent suffering, I, like 'Lula', 'hid' in my church, in my house, in my job, but since then, I have found it easier to tell others about my faith.

Spending time with believers in East Africa reinforced that lesson. I met Christians who had suffered but as a result wanted to do more for the gospel, in spite of the risks. In fact one man, knowing full well the implications, wanted us to use his real name in the magazine. *'I want my story to be heard!'* he declared. He is in exile, and he longs to return to his country, to tell his people the gospel, but the church needs him where he is for the moment.

Or 'Andrea' (main picture p12), a Somali woman who after mocking Christians came to faith herself in her homeland. *'As children we would pick up stones and throw them at Christians. We would push them over or make them wear veils,'* she said.

Sadly the pastor who cared for her in the underground church and helped her and other believers to escape Somalia, was recently martyred. However, unfazed by his death and instead of hiding away out of fear for her own safety, she is now doing more than ever to spread the gospel in the community where she has found herself. *'I call my work the seed of hope. I believe the Lord is planting seeds in people's hearts.'*

We in the UK may not have to risk death threats, imprisonment and beatings like many of our brothers and sisters, but will we use our freedom to hide or to be as bold as our suffering brothers and sisters?

Ben Gardner



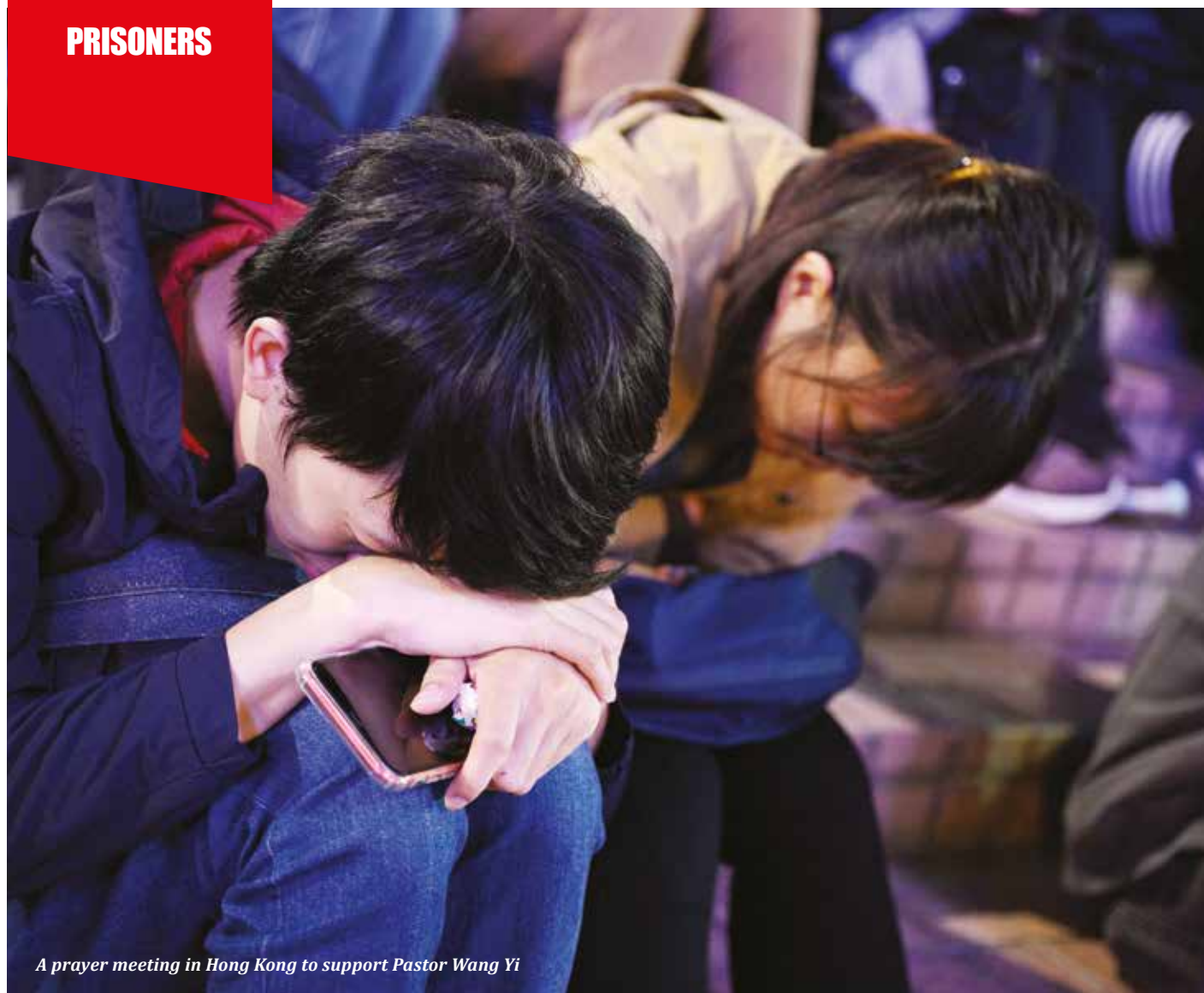
Population: 12.1 to 16.3 million (est)

Capital: Mogadishu

Government: Federal Parliamentary Republic

Religion: Sunni Muslim (99.7%); Christian (0.3%)

Sources: World Factbook, Operation World.



A prayer meeting in Hong Kong to support Pastor Wang Yi

Knowing God inside and out

There are now too many prisoners of faith in China to be able to keep count, according to Release International partners. But it is not just those behind bars who are paying a price for the gospel, reports Andrew Boyd as he follows the plight of one jailed pastor and his family

Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, Sichuan province, ran a Bible college and a primary school; it reached out to down-and-outs and its weekly meetings attracted upwards of 800 people. It was becoming simply too large to ignore.

On December 2, 2018, the authorities seized its influential leader, Pastor Wang Yi, his wife Jiang Rong, and around 100 church members.

They closed the church, accusing Pastor Wang of ‘inciting subversion of state power’ and running ‘illegal

business operations’. His ‘subversion’ was leading an unauthorised church; his illegal business: producing Christian books.

On Boxing Day the following year, they convicted, fined and sentenced Pastor Wang to nine years in prison. It was the longest sentence handed out to a house church pastor in more than a decade, according to Release International’s partner, ChinaAid.

The reason? ‘Because they proclaimed the full gospel of Jesus Christ and the ultimate authority of the Bible, and honoured Christ as the only head of the Church,’ said ChinaAid president Bob Fu.

Heart of the issue

And for many Christians in China, this is the heart of the issue: that an atheist state is demanding total

control over the church. It has driven many Christians to worship in unregistered or underground churches.

Yet even the state's Three-Self Patriotic church is not immune from persecution. Church buildings have been demolished and their crosses torn down. Congregations are monitored using face-recognition cameras, pastors are state-appointed and preaching regulated.

Pastor Wang Yi, a former legal scholar, had been outspoken in calling for religious freedom. He held annual prayer meetings to mark the massacre of pro-democracy campaigners in Tiananmen Square. And in one sermon, he called on China's President Xi Jinping, to repent of his sins.

In a public declaration, Pastor Wang recognised the authority of the Chinese government, but said when human laws contradict the laws of God, Christians must follow God.

That declaration was signed by 439 Chinese pastors, who joined him in affirming their Christian faith and calling for an end to persecution.

Pastor Wang had now become a victim of that persecution. And those left behind were forced to share in his suffering in scores of petty ways.

The authorities refused to let his family visit him, and kept up that ban for three long years. His wife could phone, but any mention of God and those calls would be cut off.

They fed Pastor Wang on mouldy rice that was years beyond its sell-by date. And they blocked all news about him, save some scraps and a paragraph in 2020, when he wrote: *'I am mute. I don't open my mouth.'*

And since his conviction, his wife and family have been subject to 24-hour surveillance. National security police have installed 360-degree cameras in their home – even in their bathroom.

Banality of evil

Those left behind have had to endure what philosophers describe as 'the banality of evil'.



Wang Yi and Jiang Rong before the pastor's imprisonment

The authorities have forbidden Mrs Jiang from contacting other church members. They have pulled Joshua, her son, from his Christian school and escort him every day to a school chosen by the state. According to ChinaAid the teenager has become withdrawn and uncommunicative.

Pastor Wang's parents, who are in their 80s, have had their home raided, and have been forced to stand to attention for extended periods.

Other church leaders have faced similar humiliations. Dai Zhichao and his family have been detained several times. And when they go out, they return to find their keyhole filled with glue, or their doorknob covered in fresh paint.

Shu Qiong was a member of a church home group. Seven police officers broke into her house to find her son and six other children studying together.

During the tussle, the boy fell, cutting his head.

And when Shu Qiong tried to protect her son, they broke her jaw. Then, when her husband tried to intervene, they beat him, too.

They confiscated their books, seized a plaque declaring, 'God loves the

world', and even took their two pet dogs.

They accused Shu of running a private school and held her for almost 24 hours. And for good measure someone slashed the tyres of her car.

'Terrifying'

Another church member, 25-year-old Ren Ruiting told her story to *World* magazine. After Pastor Wang was arrested Ren's phone lit up with calls from other church members. Then those calls stopped, as one-by-one, more than 100 were detained. 'It was terrifying,' said Ren.

She was ordered to stop attending church services, cease engaging in a cult, and sign up for government 'correction work'.

When they eventually let her go, more than 12 officers camped outside her apartment, keeping her family under surveillance for more than a fortnight and following them when they went out.

After the authorities closed their building, the church continued to hold services online, until the government banned all unauthorised religious content on the Internet.

So the church has continued to gather in inconspicuous small groups in

Continued overleaf..



Police officers broke Shu Qiong's jaw when she tried to intervene to protect her son during a raid on their home

homes, teashops and back rooms of restaurants.

But when the authorities find out, they haul everyone, including the children, to the police station.

And if the police discover meetings taking place in private apartments, they put pressure on the landlords to evict the Christians from their homes.

It sounds like a triumph of darkness over light, a victory for the banality of evil. A thriving church forced to close, its members intimidated, humiliated and scattered.

But they are not fearful. And that in itself is a sign and a wonder.

Regime 'full of fear'

As Pastor Wang wrote in his declaration: *'The Chinese communist regime is full of fear – for a church that*

no longer fears it... a church that has died and has been resurrected.'

New leaders have stepped up. 'Titus Wu' (not his real name) told *World* magazine that there have been new converts, baptisms and members. The growth since the 2018 crackdown has been 'tremendous'.

He said the example of Pastor Wang, who has stood firm in his faith, has spurred them on to serve God with even greater fervour.

Another church member, who was jailed for five days for posting on social media, 'God protect your church', led three of his cellmates to Christ – and baptised them in the sink in their cell.

And in Hong Kong, where the Chinese crackdown grows ever tighter, a pastor told *World* magazine: *'With no regrets or fear, we are willing to walk alongside Pastor Wang Yi. It's dangerous to follow Jesus Christ today, but still we go on.'*

Please help prisoners of faith and their families around the world

Your gift could provide food and toiletries for a prisoner, financial support for a prisoner's family or for an ex-prisoner struggling to support themselves

Please give using the enclosed form or securely online at releaseinternational.org/give

WHEN THE CHURCH HAS TO CHOOSE

Release International works in partnership with US-based ChinaAid to support persecuted Christians. Its founder, Bob Fu, says: *'Persecution has been getting worse and worse under the Maoist-style "Cultural Revolution" of President Xi Jinping.'*

'The persecution and massive detentions have so intensified in recent years that our annual report has stopped estimating the number of Christians who have been arrested or detained!'

Eighty per cent of the persecution in China, he believes, is directed towards underground or unauthorised house churches, such as Early Rain Covenant Church, made up of Christians who see Christ, not the state, as head of the Church.

The decision by Early Rain and other congregations to stay independent from the state and suffer the consequences is an example to Christians worldwide. How would the church in the West respond in similar circumstances?

Would it submit to state control and join the state-registered, state-regulated church, or would it choose freedom of faith – even if it meant jail for many believers and a loss of freedom?

Pastor Wang and the members of Early Rain Covenant Church have made their choice.

'Keep praying for the persecuted,' says Bob Fu, 'for perseverance and courage. And pray for the persecutors, that their hearts can be changed to respect religious freedom.'

UK SPEAKER TOUR FOR BOB FU

We are delighted to confirm that Release International partner and ChinaAid President Bob Fu (pictured) will be visiting the UK in October. Bob was born and raised in mainland China and today he is one of the leading voices supporting persecuted Christians in the country.

We will be arranging a series of events across the country as well as a central online event in which Bob will share about the growing restrictions in China.

Events will take place between October 1 and 7. Further information will be available nearer the time on our website, social media and news update emails.





Defectors help to translate scriptures that will be sent into North Korea

An estimated 15,000 copies of the Ross New Testament were distributed throughout Korea and northeast China by Korean colporteurs and Bible smugglers before foreign missionaries became established in Korea and decided to develop their own Bible translation.

While the official translation committee ultimately created their own version, respect for the Ross translation has grown

‘Ordinary Korean people deserve to hear that voice again today, exactly as it first sounded.’

over the years. Pastor Foley said: *‘In 1960 when the committee was working on the new translation of the New Testament, a liaison to the committee from the British and Foreign Bible Society, Richard Rutt, wrote, “The best piece of [Bible] translation work so far done in Korean was Ross’s”, because of how easy it was for ordinary Korean people to understand.’*

He added: *‘How can it be that the only place to see a Ross Bible is in a museum and the only people who can read it are scholars of early Korean writings? The Ross Bible is how the voice of Christ first came to ordinary Korean people. Ordinary Korean people deserve to hear that voice again today, exactly as it first sounded — or as close to how it first sounded as possible.’*

The distribution of Luke’s gospel is planned for both North and South Korea.

A new Bible translation specifically designed to reach ordinary Koreans with the gospel is being produced by Release International partners with the help of North Korean defectors.

Just as Scottish missionary John Ross disciplined Koreans by giving them the task of translating scripture into their native language back in the 19th century, so our partner, Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) Korea, is marking the 140th anniversary of the publication of Ross’s Gospel of Luke by producing an easy-to-understand contemporary version with the help of North Koreans.

‘Today, Korean Christians are able to read the Bible in a large number and variety of translations. Sadly, the one Bible that is not available for them to read is the Bible that has been called the foundation of the Korean Church,’ said VOM Korea CEO Eric Foley.

As well as helping to disciple those who translate it, it is hoped that the new version of Luke this

autumn, followed by John’s gospel and Acts in 2023 and a full Ross Contemporary Reader’s Version in 2024, will not only bless the church in South Korea but more crucially help to strengthen North Korean believers who have defected and those inside the ‘Hermit Kingdom’.

Ross’s Gospel of Luke, first published in 1882 and smuggled into Korea from Moukden,

‘The Ross Bible was the Bible of the Korean church during its formative period.’

China (today’s Shenyang), was the first portion of scripture ever translated into the Korean language.

Pastor Foley said: *‘The Ross Bible was the Bible of the Korean church during its formative period, and it left a permanent imprint on the Korean church in the form of a church that is Bible-centred and lay-driven. God used the Ross Bible powerfully to impart the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ to the first generation of Korean Christians.’*

Study course answers the tough questions

The response from supporters to our study course *All for Jesus* has been so encouraging. Thank you for all your comments.

If your church's small groups have returned to meeting in person you might like to consider using the material this autumn.

All for Jesus is a five-part small-group study course that examines Christian discipleship and how the reality of persecution speaks into that discipleship. Each study focuses on a passage of scripture and includes both introductory notes and notes for group leaders.

Release International published the booklet last year. In March this year

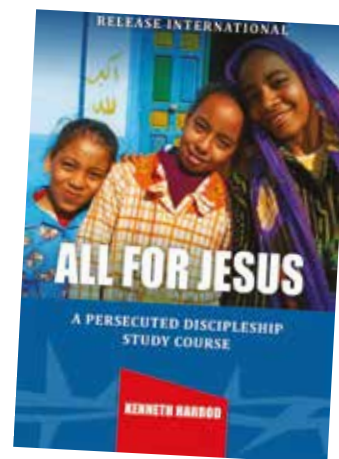
we ran an online (Zoom) course, which was well attended by supporters from all corners of the UK – and even some from overseas! Here is what some said about the course:

'It was great discussing with like-minded folk from throughout the country and beyond; it felt like we were part of the one body!'

'Thank you so much for the study course over the past five Wednesday evenings. It has been such an encouraging time, sharing views based on Bible truths and meeting like-minded people. We actually experienced "iron sharpens iron". The course has helped me enormously to understand that God's word has so much application to truly support and answer difficult questions – even on persecution and suffering.'

'The passages and the questions were really helpful in stimulating discussion and fellowship, and we all seemed to get on so well. Thank you for producing the material.'

'I am always looking for teaching and interaction that will grow my faith and make it more real and relevant. So I was glad to come upon this study.'



The booklets, priced at £4 for an individual copy, are available for groups at a special price of £9 for packs of ten (including postage and packing).

In the booklet's introduction Paul Robinson, Release International's CEO, writes, 'Being persecuted is not something we are ever encouraged to aspire to as disciples – as if it were some kind of badge of honour. But neither is it an extraordinary phenomenon that we can, to all intents and purposes, rule out of our experience of the Christian life. The five studies in this short series enable you to reflect on genuine discipleship and serve to remind us how normal persecution was for New Testament Christians.'



CYCLE OF LIFE: Retired vicar Robert de Berry and fellow cyclists gather at the North Foreland Point Lighthouse in Kent, the starting point of his amazing 900-mile cycle ride to Cornwall and back. Robert was due to be back in Kent by June 25, having spoken at many churches along the way, raising awareness about persecuted Christians and encouraging prayer. If you would like to help Robert and his team of riders meet their aim of raising £250,000 in sponsorship you can still do so through our website: releaseinternational.org/bikepilgrims.

Persecution drama at Keswick

If you are going to the Keswick Convention in the Lake District this summer, you will have a great opportunity to see the Artless Theatre Company's powerful production, *If Prison Walls Could Speak*.

The Christian company will be performing the drama in weeks one and three of this year's popular Bible convention.

Artless are also putting on two performances at the Emmanuel Centre in Westminster, Central London, on July 4 and 6.

The play, which has been touring since last autumn, is based on Petr Jasek's account of his time in prison in Sudan, as told in the book, *Imprisoned with ISIS*. Jasek was arrested as a result of his ministry to persecuted Christians. For other performance details go to: releaseinternational.org/artless-theatre-tour

INVITE A SPEAKER

Our team of experienced speakers are available to join your church or online meeting to help you support and pray for persecuted Christians. They would love to hear from you!

Ireland:
Stephen on 028 9334 0014
or 07933 313169

London & South:
Chioma on 07861 656269

Midlands & North:
Allister on 07916 396178

Scotland:
James on 07434 894016

Wales & West of England:
Paul on 07861 651139

Helen helps others' future with her present



We are very thankful to Scottish supporter Helen who decided to raise money for Release

International at her 90th birthday party celebrations. Helen said, *'I told my friends who had been invited to both my parties that I didn't want any presents, but if anyone wanted to give something instead of a present, there would be a box into which they could contribute to Release International.'*

Altogether more than 100 people came to Helen's parties and she raised a total of £1,330.

Helen said, *'The Lord has been good to me. I feel I want to help people, and this is the Lord's work. I pray for Release International every night.'*

Burkina Faso in the spotlight

Rising persecution of Christians in the west African country of Burkina Faso will be the focus of a series of special meetings in the Midlands and North of England this summer.

Dr Susanna, a Release International partner who works in Burkina Faso, will be speaking on the rise of Islamist attacks there at four meetings from **Wednesday, June 29** to **Sunday, July 3**.

For more information, go to: releaseinternational.org/tour/day-of-the-christian-martyr-speaker-tour/.

Praying for the nations

Release International is excited to be involved in a new prayer partnership called For the Sake of the World (FTSOTW), which is a call for Christians to unite in prayer for change in the nations. Together with MAF, Mercy Ships and Elim Missions we are encouraging people to join the movement and plant FTSOTW prayer groups. If you are interested in starting a group and receiving regular prayer information, or if you would like to join bi-monthly online prayer events go to www.forthesakeoftheworld.com or follow the Facebook page @forthesakeoftheworld.pray.

Special online event with Ben Kwashi

We are delighted to be hosting a special online event with Release International partner Dr Ben Kwashi, the Archbishop of Jos in Nigeria, on August 24 at 7.30pm.

Ben has devoted his life to serving God in north and central Nigeria where Christians face sustained and violent persecution. We partner with the archbishop on a special project to train and equip local pastors to serve in these dangerous areas.

Join us to hear Ben share more about this important work and be inspired by his energy and commitment to the gospel. There will also be an opportunity to put questions to him.

The event will be hosted on Zoom and registration is through Eventbrite. For more information go to www.releaseinternational.org/events.

Ben will be speaking at the **Bangor Worldwide Convention** in Northern Ireland from August 19-28 where Release International will also be represented. If you are planning to attend, please do come say hello at our stand.



Release International to host seminar at Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast

We are delighted to be able to partner with our friends at Christians in Parliament this year to take part in the National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast live at Westminster Hall in the Houses of Parliament. The event will take place from 7.30am to 9.00am on Tuesday, July 5.

The breakfast, chaired by Andrew Selous MP, is a great opportunity to pray for our Parliament, Government and politics, to build relationships between church leaders and parliamentarians and to reflect upon the relevance of the Christian faith to our public life.

The theme this year is 'Serving the Common Good' and the main speaker will be Revd Les Isaac OBE, founder of Street Pastors and President of Ascension Trust.

After the main breakfast, there will be a programme of seminars as well as a dedicated hybrid event for church leaders later in the morning. Release International will be hosting a seminar from 9.15am to 10.15am titled *Persecuted Christians in Africa: God's Goodness in Times of Trial*. We have invited speakers who include Dr Susanna*, who works in Burkina Faso; Dr Berhane Asmelash of Release Eritrea; and Archbishop Ben Kwashi, who will share via Zoom about his ministry and witness in Nigeria.

**Name changed*

**Can suffering be part of God's love?
Do all things, including persecution,
really work for God's purposes?
Release's Stephen McIlroy explores...**

The paradox of love

The Apostle Paul is found teaching the early church, based in Rome, that the love of God includes both suffering and glory. Surely these are opposites?

Writing, probably during his third missionary journey, Paul offers teaching which reflects his own personal experiences. He knew what it was like to be afflicted for the name of Jesus.

Romans 8:28 is a well-known verse. But how can it be true? Can all things, both good and evil, somehow be working for His purposes? This verse is one which only God's people can claim. We are the most highly favoured of all mankind, that He would manage events in such a way that brings a blessing. Paul is insisting that the present trials can only be viewed within this context. That's difficult to understand, as well as being the opposite of the voice of our culture. But does this offer a glimpse into why Christians still suffer imprisonment and martyrdom, even today?

Paradoxically, Paul continues turning the application of this teaching into a note of triumph. If these afflictions befall His people, but we realise that He is still in control of all things, then who can frustrate His saving purposes? Which foe can defeat us? An ancient Rabbi is known to have commented that 'for the godly man, all things, even though for others they are evils, are beneficial'. Paul echoes these thoughts and applies them to Jesus. In essence, he is saying: who delivered Jesus to death? Judas? Pilate? The Jewish authorities? In one sense, yes, but ultimately, and at the same time, it was the Father who delivered Jesus!

Therefore, the giving of His Son proves how totally God is for us and has desired that Jesus be the eldest in a family of brothers and sisters, sharing a family likeness.

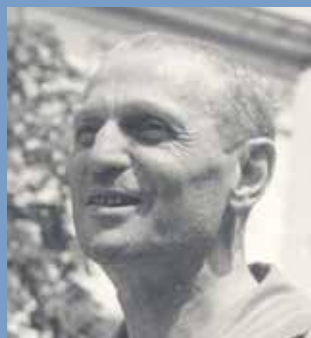
Continuing, Paul depicts a courtroom scene. It is impossible for any accuser to condemn God's children, Paul states. Our consciences, Satan, or human enemies will never condemn us because Jesus is both the judge and the defence lawyer. Due to what He has done (paid the price), and is doing currently (interceding in heaven), all charges are dropped against us!

So, therefore, what can come between us and His love? Paul considers affliction from the physical world, using seven possibilities (verse 35). These sufferings are various and are often manifested in incarceration or death. Culture might look upon this as proof of a lack of love from the Creator, but not the believer. Paul quotes Psalm

44 to prove that God is not taken by surprise, but foretold the suffering of His people centuries before the time of Paul's writing. We are told that, despite these circumstances, we are literally 'super-conquerors'! The story of Pastor 'Samuel' in our feature on Somali Christians (see page 12) and how God used his persecutors to declare the gospel is just one example of the Lord's sovereignty.

Finally, Paul moves on to focus on affliction from the spiritual world. He declares that he is convinced that no forces or powers can remove God's love: in life and death Jesus will be with us; angelic oppression cannot overthrow us; time must not force us to yield to the temptation of despair; height and depth (ancient terms of astrology, controlling human destiny) cannot influence the outcome; absolutely nothing seen or unseen.

INSPIRING FAITH



'Whoever wishes to meet Jesus must meet him in places where brothers and sisters of Jesus are hungry, thirsty, naked, unwanted, sick or in prison. Whoever keeps himself distant from these places remains distant from Jesus.'

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

IF PRISON WALLS COULD SPEAK

BY ARTLESS THEATRE COMPANY

A TRUE STORY OF RESILIENCE,
ESPIONAGE AND FAITH
FROM THE HEART OF THE
PERSECUTED CHURCH.

★★★★★ (*Centurion*, 2021)
"Incredible and unmissable"

★★★★★ (*To War With God*, 2018)
"Immersive, moving, thought-provoking"

BASED ON THE BOOK 'IMPRISONED WITH ISIS' BY PETR JÁSEK.
ARTLESS PRESENTS A ONE-MAN HYBRID MULTIMEDIA
PERFORMANCE FEATURING IMMERSIVE VIDEO AND SOUND



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Theatre Co.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians

Performances include: **Mon 4 July and Wed 6 July at the Emmanuel Centre, Westminster, London**
Keswick Convention weeks 1 and 3

Full list of dates at: releaseinternational.org/artless-theatre-tour



IDOP ONLINE 2022

International Day of Prayer

Sunday 6 November
7:30pm

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians

evangelical alliance
together making Jesus known

 **Open Doors**

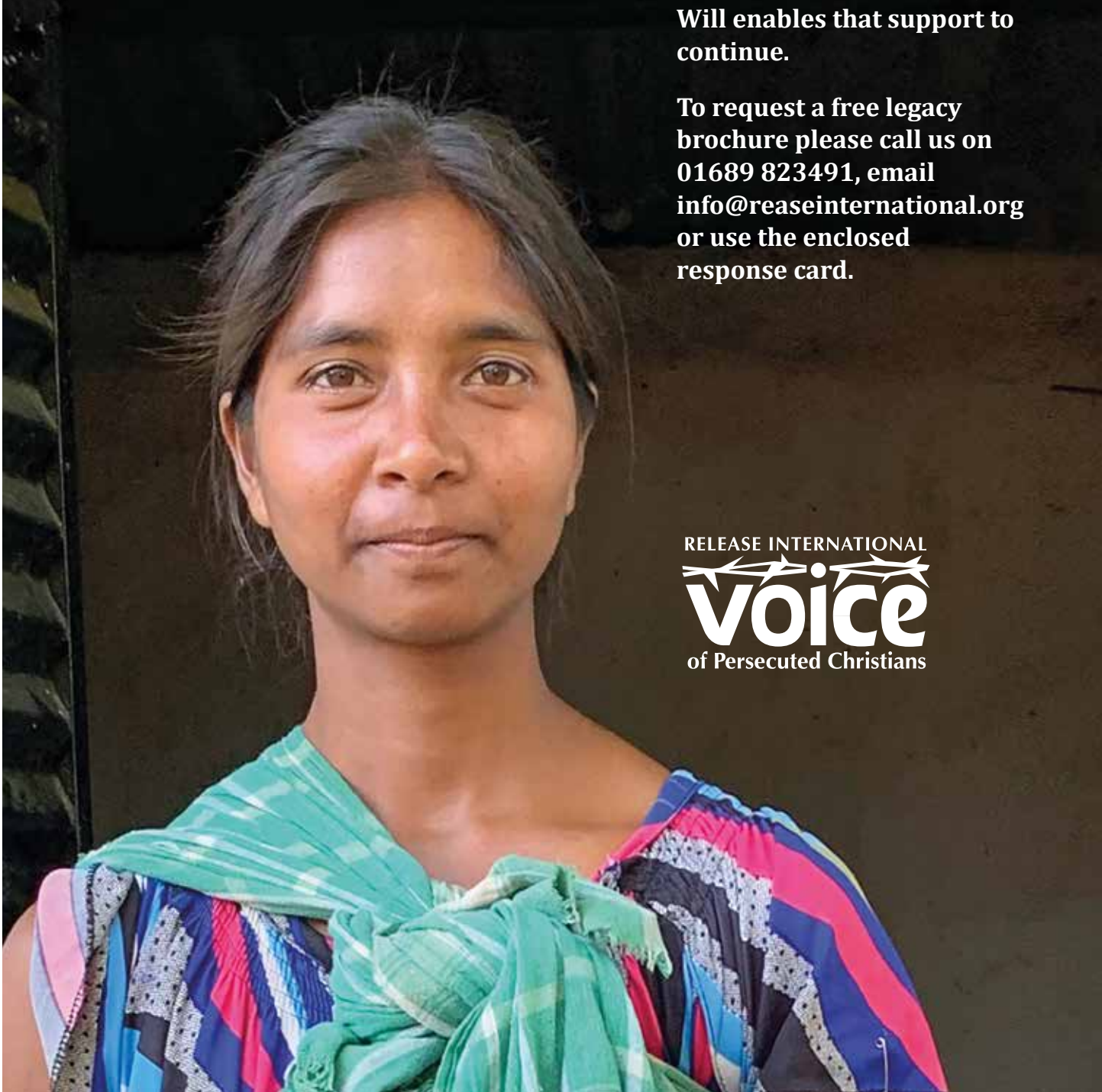
**CSW everyone
free to believe**

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.

Your support enables our partners to provide prayerful, pastoral and practical help to persecuted Christians in over 25 countries. Including a gift to Release International in your Will enables that support to continue.

To request a free legacy brochure please call us on 01689 823491, email info@reaseinternational.org or use the enclosed response card.



RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians

prayershield

July - September 2022



Christian friends Vee and Sun are passionate about sharing the gospel in Laos, despite it costing them everything

JULY 2022

Heavenly Father,

Your eyes scan the earth to seek out Your children: You strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to You (2 Chronicles 16:9). None is hidden from You.

Lord, please be with my persecuted brothers and sisters today. May each one know that Your hand is on their life; that You are their defender.

Remind them, Father, that whatever they are suffering today for Your name's sake, You see them and You will deliver justice.

*In Jesus' name,
Amen*

LAOS

FRIDAY 1: Christians in Laos are often severely persecuted by relatives when they turn to Christ. Pray that God will grant believers a steadfast spirit that will cause their persecutors to seek Christ too.

SATURDAY 2: Pray for Christians Vee and Sun (pictured) in Luang Prabang province, who have become housemates since they were rejected by their families and evicted from their village. They have little, but passionately share the gospel.

SUNDAY 3: Pray for new believers Phan and Yun. They were evicted from Phan's parents' home when the couple turned to Christ. Local Christians are supporting them.

MONDAY 4: Bounsaen is 101 years old and is still heavily involved in leading a 500-strong church for Khmu ethnic minority believers. Join him in praying that the young people of Laos will experience the love of Christ.

TUESDAY 5: Many Lao Christians are a tiny minority in their villages. Pray that God will equip them to share their faith, even in the face of hostility. And pray that the Lord will add to the number of believers in Laos daily.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians



Despite persecution, many Indians are choosing to embrace Christ

INDIA

WEDNESDAY 6: A third of India's 28 states now limit or prohibit religious conversion. Religious freedoms are declining. Pray for a reversal in this trend.

THURSDAY 7: Pray for believers in Madhya Pradesh where persecution against Christians has increased dramatically since new anti-conversion laws were passed last year. Within six months, at least 47 churches had been forced to close.

FRIDAY 8: Please pray for three Christian families in Ejariguda village, Odisha state, who were beaten and their homes destroyed because they had refused to join in with traditional festivities.

SATURDAY 9: House church leader Podia Madkam, who is a widower, had three daughters kidnapped by tribal villagers in Ejariguda (above) ten years ago: they remain missing. Pray that Podia and his daughters will be reunited.

SUNDAY 10: Pray for the family of Pastor Yalam Shankar who was brutally killed by masked men in Vijayapura district, Chhattisgarh state, in front of his wife and daughter-in-law.

MONDAY 11: A pastor in Uttar Pradesh and his uncle were arrested in April on suspicion of 'forced conversion' – then brutally beaten over a 24-hour period in police custody, before being released. Pray that God will heal and encourage them.

TUESDAY 12: Pray for Pastor Kailash Dudwe in Dhar district, Madhya Pradesh. He was beaten unconscious by Hindu extremists in January, and still faces death threats and baseless charges of forcible conversion.

WEDNESDAY 13: Pray for Pastor Kelom Kalyan Tet who was beaten by a mob in Delhi and accused of illegal conversion activities. They tied him to the central reservation at a busy road intersection and forced him to chant Hindu devotionals.

UKRAINE

THURSDAY 14: Pray for all Christians in Ukraine; that the Lord will sustain them in their faith so they can be a powerful witness in the current conflict.

FRIDAY 15: Evangelical pastors in Ukraine are believed to be on a Russian 'blacklist' because of their support of the Ukrainian Government. Ask God to protect and guide them.

SATURDAY 16: Please pray for the safe return of Alexander Glushko, pastor of an evangelical church in Mariupol, arrested by Russian forces in March. Another pastor nearby, also blacklisted, managed to avoid arrest.

SUNDAY 17: Even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Protestant churches in Russian-controlled regions of eastern Ukraine were restricted. Pray for them as Russian troops focus their assault on eastern regions.

MONDAY 18: Let's stand with the church in Ukraine in praying for an end to the conflict and the emergence of a new Ukraine where religious freedoms are upheld in every region.

EGYPT

TUESDAY 19: Thank God that about 240 churches and places of worship in Egypt were granted legal status in April by a government committee that now oversees the legalisation of churches.

WEDNESDAY 20: Pray that building and rebuilding churches in Egypt will become easier, and pray that the President and his Government will make policy decisions that extend religious freedoms.

THURSDAY 21: Thank God that nine Coptic Christians were recently released from prison. They had been arrested in January after protests related to the demolition of a church in Minya.

FRIDAY 22: The new head of Egypt's Supreme Constitutional Court, Judge Boulos (Paul) Fahmy Eskandar, is the first Christian to be appointed to the position. Pray that his appointment will prove a further step towards greater religious equality for all citizens.

SATURDAY 23: Please pray for the family of Archbishop Arsanious Wadid who was stabbed to death in Alexandria as he handed out Ramadan gifts to passers-by with young people from his church.

IRAN

SUNDAY 24: The Supreme Court recently dismissed the request for a retrial of Naser Navard Gol-Tapeh, who is serving a ten-year sentence for his church activities. Pray for Naser who is being held in Evin prison in Tehran.

MONDAY 25: Pray for the many believers serving time in Iranian prisons. Ask God to sustain and strengthen them so they hold firm to their faith.

TUESDAY 26: Pray that the Iranian authorities will come to recognise that religious minorities are no threat to state security and, instead, are a force for good in society.

WEDNESDAY 27: Pray for Anooshavan Avedian, an Iranian-Armenian Christian leader who has recently been sentenced to ten years in prison for leading 'an illegal group'. He plans to appeal.

THURSDAY 28: Two Christian converts, Abbas Souri and Maryam Mohammadi, arrested with Anooshavan (above) have been told they will be 'deprived of social rights' for ten years, including employment, banned from foreign travel for two years and sent into internal exile for two years. Pray that their appeal will be successful.

FRIDAY 29: Pray for Rahmat Rostamipour who was detained after being arrested at his home in Anzali in April. His wife, Azar, was interrogated for several hours. Pray that no charges will be brought and that Rahmat will be released.

SATURDAY 30: Pray for church leader Fariba Dalir who is newly wed and now serving a two-year sentence for 'acting against national security'. She was detained in Tehran in July 2021 and jailed this April.

SUNDAY 31: Pray that God will use prisoners of faith in Iran to minister to their fellow inmates and guards and show His love and compassion.

AUGUST 2022

PAKISTAN

MONDAY 1: Cybercrime officials beat and arrested Fansan Shahid at his Lahore home, accusing him of 'blasphemous comments' on social media. Pray for his release: his family claim Fansan was tortured and forced to make a false confession.

TUESDAY 2: Pray for protection and provision for Fansan's family (above): they have no means of supporting themselves while he is in custody and fear retaliation.

WEDNESDAY 3: Thank God for brave lawyers such as Saif Ul Malook, who is providing legal help to Fansan's family. His counsel has overturned the convictions of other Pakistani Christians accused of blasphemy, including Asia Bibi.

THURSDAY 4: Pray that the Government will do more to counter false accusations of blasphemy. Church leaders and rights activists have repeatedly called on the Government to act.

FRIDAY 5: Please continue to pray for the safe return of the many Christian girls who have been abducted, forcibly converted and married to Muslim men. They include 'Helen', 22, who disappeared in February, allegedly abducted by neighbours.

SATURDAY 6: Pray that the authorities in Pakistan will take concerted action to end the abduction of Christian young women and girls.



Children in Pakistan receive picture Bibles thanks to Release International associate ministries

SUNDAY 7: Release International associate ministries are distributing children's Bibles in Urdu (see photo): most Pakistani Christians cannot afford to buy Bibles. Pray that the children receiving God's word will understand God's love for them, amid persecution.

MONDAY 8: Please pray for Zafar Bhatti, whose life sentence for blasphemy was changed to the death sentence last year. Zafar has been in ill-health. Pray his appeal will be heard soon.

CHINA

TUESDAY 9: Release International's partners say it is impossible to count the number of prisoners of faith in China: many arrests are undocumented. Pray that

each one will know that God sees them.

WEDNESDAY 10: Please continue to pray for Pastor Wang Yi, leader of Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, Sichuan province, who is still serving a nine-year sentence. His wife, Jiang Rong, and family are under 24-hour surveillance (see *Voice* magazine, pages 16-18).

THURSDAY 11: Pray for Pastor Wang's son, Joshua, whom officials escort every day to a school chosen by the state. Our partners say the teenager has become withdrawn.

FRIDAY 12: Many other Early Rain Covenant Church members face ongoing persecution. Ren Ruiting, 25, was ordered to sign up for government 'correction work'. Many others have been

detained. Pray they will stand firm in their faith.

SATURDAY 13: Praise God that Early Rain Covenant Church has experienced 'tremendous' growth since the December 2018 crackdown, with new members, new converts and many baptisms.

SUNDAY 14: Pray that the church in China will become, in Pastor Wang's words, a 'church that has died and has been resurrected', one that does not fear man.

MONDAY 15: Praise God for the powerful witness of Chinese street evangelist Chen Wensheng who served another 15 days of detention in March for preaching the gospel – then returned to the streets.

TUESDAY 16: Stand with Chen Wensheng (above) in

praying for those to whom he preached the gospel during his latest spell in detention in Hengyang, Hunan province.

WEDNESDAY 17: Our partner China Aid says that 80 per cent of the persecution in China is directed towards underground or unauthorised house churches. Pray for perseverance and courage for all God's people in China.

THURSDAY 18: Thank God for the release earlier this year of five Chinese Christians who served prison terms of six to eight months after attending a conference in Malaysia at which an outspoken critic of the Chinese Communist Party spoke.

FRIDAY 19: Pray for Pastor An Yankui of the Taiyuan Zion Reformed Church and church member Zhang Chenghao who are detained, awaiting trial, after attending the conference in Malaysia (above). Their church relates closely with Early Rain Covenant Church.

NIGERIA

SATURDAY 20: Pray for the family of Christian student Deborah Samuel (also known as Deborah Emmanuel Yakubu) who was beaten and stoned to death and her body burned, in Sokoto in May. She had been falsely accused of blasphemy after refusing to date a Muslim.

SUNDAY 21: The Sultan of Sokoto, the leader of Nigeria's Muslims,

condemned Deborah's killing; extremists protested violently around his home, demanding the release of two arrested suspects. Other faith leaders have failed to condemn the murder. Pray that justice and religious tolerance will prevail.

MONDAY 22: Deborah's death has provoked fresh calls for Nigeria to be divided into a Muslim north and Christian south – and for every Christian in Sokoto state to be butchered. Pray in the opposite spirit, for peaceful co-existence.

TUESDAY 23: Thank God that Christian students at Deborah's college have refused to be drawn into the violence. Ask God to give His people courage and grace to resist retaliation.

WEDNESDAY 24: Pray that the Government of Nigeria will take decisive action in response to Deborah's death, to deter further atrocities of this kind.

THURSDAY 25: Religious violence is predicted to increase in Nigeria ahead of presidential elections next February. Pray against any attempt to exploit the elections and deepen inter-religious tensions.

FRIDAY 26: Pray for the families of six Christians murdered in an attack on a Christian-owned market in Taraba state in April. Islamic State West Africa Province admitted responsibility.

SATURDAY 27: Rev Joseph Aketeh Bako was kidnapped

'Light will ever prevail over the forces of darkness.'

Rev Stephen Baba Panya, on the death of church member Deborah Samuel

from his home in Kaduna city in March: his death was announced in May. Ask God to comfort his family and church.

SUNDAY 28: Pray for the safe return of the many Christians abducted in Nigeria in recent months, including 22 Christian girls kidnapped in January in the Chibok area of Borno state.

MONDAY 29: Pray for an end to the bloodshed in Kaduna state, which has been severe recently. In one day in March, 50 believers were killed and 100 more abducted when Fulani herdsmen raided mainly Christian communities in Giwa county.

TUESDAY 30: In April, militants raided four villages in Kaduna, killing 18 Christians and burning down 92 houses. Pray that God will change the hearts of their persecutors.

WEDNESDAY 31: Extremists killed more than 30 people and destroyed about 200 houses in a three-hour raid on Kagoro, Kaduna state, in March. One resident said: 'Lord, this is too much for us.' Pray that the Government and security forces will act on this plea.

SEPTEMBER 2022

BURKINA FASO

THURSDAY 1: Islamist attacks against Christians have risen sharply in Burkina Faso since 2019, displacing more than 800,000 people. Pray for those who have lost everything.

FRIDAY 2: Pastor Pierre (pictured) was forced to flee his home in 2019 when Islamists overran his village. He now shares the gospel with other displaced people and supports 16 of them in his home. Praise God many have come to Christ.

SATURDAY 3: More than 200 churches in north and east Burkina Faso have been closed. Pray their doors will reopen soon.

SUNDAY 4: Armed jihadists destroyed part of St Kisito de Bougui Christian boarding school in February, warning they would kill anyone who returned to the school. Pray for the 146 children on its roll and its teaching staff.

MONDAY 5: Church leaders believe jihadist attacks are an attempt to destroy longstanding peaceful relationships between Christians and Muslims. Pray that both faith groups will resist this provocation.

TUESDAY 6: Ask God to guide Christian leaders in Burkina Faso, amid the violence and uncertainty. Pray that they will hear His voice and see His hand at work.



Pastor Pierre was driven from his home in Burkina Faso by Islamists and now ministers to those displaced with him

NORTH KOREA

WEDNESDAY 7: Lift to the Lord the nation of North Korea and its leaders: pray in faith that the people of the 'hermit kingdom' will open their hearts to God.

THURSDAY 8: Pray for North Korean defectors and Release International partner Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) Korea who are working on a new Bible translation designed to be accessible to ordinary Koreans (see *Voice* magazine, page 19).

FRIDAY 9: Pray that the Ross Contemporary Reader's Version (above), and pre-releases of some Gospels, will build up the church in South Korea, and strengthen North Korean believers within and outside their homeland.

SATURDAY 10: North Korea is facing serious challenges, including food shortages and Covid-19. Pray that secret believers inside the nation will be a powerful witness to God's love even if they cannot mention His name.

SOMALIA

SUNDAY 11: Pray for the many Somali believers who leave their homeland but struggle to find a new spiritual home abroad because churches are distrustful of them (see *Voice* magazine, pages 12-15).

MONDAY 12: Please pray for Release International partners as they provide vital practical and spiritual care for Somali Christians who have left their homeland.

TUESDAY 13: 'Lula' had to leave her family in Somalia after coming to know Jesus. Her father publicly called for her to be killed, and her house was demolished. Thank God for her enduring love for her persecutors.

WEDNESDAY 14: Pastor 'Samuel', a former imam who came to know Jesus in the 1980s, has led many to Christ in his new homeland, after fleeing persecution in Somalia. A *fatwa* has been declared against him by Islamist extremists *al-Shabaab*.

THURSDAY 15: Thank the Lord that 'in all things God works for the good of those who love him' (Romans 8:28). *Al-Shabaab* published Pastor

Samuel's story on billboards. 'They were preaching the gospel to those I could never reach!' he says.

FRIDAY 16: Ask God to bless Pastor Samuel's discipleship of Muslim-background believers, born out of a desire to help them stand firm in their faith and not waver due to isolation.

SATURDAY 17: 'Amanda' was beaten by her husband after she gave her life to Christ. He later abandoned her. Pray that God will make prosperous the small shop she has set up with the support of our partner.

SUNDAY 18: Pray for our partner 'Abdul' and his team supporting Christians such as Lula, Samuel and Amanda who have fled Somalia, and providing support, fellowship and protection.

MONDAY 19: Local churches are often afraid of Muslim-background believers from Somalia, suspecting them of spying. Pray for a change of heart and a spirit of hospitality to come upon them.

TUESDAY 20: Thank God for the transformation He has brought about in the heart of 'Andrea', a Somali who used to mock and throw stones at Christians before coming to faith herself.

ERITREA

WEDNESDAY 21: It's now 20 years since Eritrea shut down most of its churches, outlawing every religion except Sunni Islam, the Orthodox Church, Roman Catholicism and the Lutheran Church. Pray for fortitude and

fresh vision for God's people in Eritrea.

THURSDAY 22: An estimated 220 Christians remain behind bars in Eritrea, many in inhumane conditions. Pray for their immediate release.

FRIDAY 23: In March 29 Christians, believed to be 17 women and 12 men, were jailed after police raided a prayer meeting in Asmara. Pray they will be freed soon.

SATURDAY 24: Pray for God's protection over church leaders in Eritrea: they continue to be a target for arrest and persecution because they are authority figures in society.

SUNDAY 25: Thank God that Christianity continues to grow in Eritrea. Pray that God will multiply daily the numbers of those being added into His church family there.

ETHIOPIA

MONDAY 26: Despite Ethiopia being considered a majority-Christian country, believers suffer harassment by traditional Christians and radical Islamists. Pray that God will build unity across Christian denominations.

TUESDAY 27: Pray for believers in the Tigray region of Ethiopia who are being caught up in the conflict between separatists and government troops. Church leaders have been a particular target.



Release International team members praying with Somali Christians



Members of a congregation in Ethiopia raise their hands to indicate they do not have a Bible

WEDNESDAY 28: In Aksum, Tigray, Eritrean troops allied to the Ethiopian Government reportedly killed at least 78 priests in November 2020. Continue to pray for the church in this area; that God will raise up new leaders and strengthen His people.

THURSDAY 29: Tigray is one of the areas worst affected by the drought that has ravaged East Africa this year. Pray that God will use His persecuted

people there to spread hope and a desire for the gospel.

FRIDAY 30: Access to Bibles is poor in Ethiopia, often due to poverty. When a Release International associate ministry asked a large congregation how many needed a Bible, most raised their hands (see photo). Pray that access to Bibles and a hunger for God's word will continue to grow.

Lord Jesus,

Thank You for the powerful witness of those who renounce all earthly things in pursuit of You.

For my sisters who continue to preach the gospel after losing everything; for my brothers who share Your love despite the death threats.

Lord, renew in me a fresh passion for spreading Your word. Let me not be among those who are asleep when You come like a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:2).

Awaken Your church, Lord!

Amen

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

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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