

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL 7x7 PRAYER ALERT

Tuesday, January 27, 2008

Prayer support is crucial to those who suffer for their faith in Jesus. Please use these alerts to prompt your own prayers, and to facilitate prayer in your church and other Christian meetings. Please also send it on to other Christians. This information can also be reproduced in church magazines and news bulletins, provided the source is acknowledged.

PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS NEED YOU!

Release wants to recruit volunteers from around the UK and Ireland to represent the needs of persecuted Christians to their churches. Could you be a Church Rep? Your core role would be to receive and disseminate information, and encourage prayerful support for the ministry within your church. How you develop the role depends on the time you have to give. Church Reps are a vital part of the Release team. Please prayerfully consider if you can join us – and pray that many others will take on this role too. To find out more, ring Gene on 01689 823491.

1. SRI LANKA

Sri Lankan churches are urging Christians worldwide to lobby the Government in Colombo against an anti-conversion Bill which could become law imminently.

Next month, Parliament is to vote on a Bill that would make it illegal to forcibly convert someone to another religion. A simple majority vote would make the Bill law – and threaten to make life even tougher for Christians in Sri Lanka.

Church leaders claim the Bill is loosely worded and fear that it would be misused to harass Christians and limit church work, including charity programmes. Christians have already been attacked and accused of 'forcible conversion' over activities such as distributing relief aid after the 2004 tsunami. They make up less than 7 per cent of the population in Sri Lanka, a mainly Buddhist country.

The Bill proposes a penalty of up to five years in jail and a hefty fine for anyone involved in illegal conversion. The penalty rises to seven years in jail if the person converted is a minor, a woman or someone who falls into a number of other broad categories.

Now the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL), a partner of Release, is calling on Christians across the world to pray against the Bill – and to write to the Sri Lankan authorities calling for it to be dropped (see below).

'It is our gravest concern that enactment of this law will result in legalised harassment and victimisation of innocent citizens who profess the Christian faith,' says Godfrey Yogarajah, General Secretary of the NCEASL.

The 'Prohibition of forcible conversion of religion' Bill, now awaiting its third reading, was first proposed in July 2004 by the hard-line Buddhist National Heritage Party (JHU). It has been hotly contested by Christian and civil rights groups ever since. NCEASL was one of several organisations that challenged the original Bill in the Supreme Court in 2004, prompting amendments to two clauses judged to be unconstitutional.

(Sources: BBC, Christian Today, CIA World Factbook, NCEASL)

Act: Write to the Sri Lankan High Commissioner in London expressing polite concern about the proposed anti-conversion Bill being considered by Parliament. A sample letter is attached to this Prayer Alert. Write to: His Excellency S. S. Ganegama Arachchi, Acting High Commissioner, 13 Hyde Park Gardens, London W2 2LU. Email: mail@slhc-london.co.uk Please do not mention Release International in your letter. To view a copy of the anti-conversion section of the Bill, go to www.persecution.net/download/lk-legislation.pdf

Pray: Pray that the Sri Lankan church will stand firm in its faith and thrive under pressure. Pray that the proposed anti-conversion Bill will be derailed, even at this late stage.

2. CHINA

Elderly Christian prisoner Shuang Shuying has been denied permission to visit her dying husband – even though she is due to be freed within a fortnight.

Hua Zaichen, the 91-year-old father of Beijing house church leader Hua Huiqi, is reportedly on his death bed – but prison officials are stubbornly refusing to let his wife out to see him.

If Hua Zaichen does die before his wife's release date, scheduled for February 8, Shuang has been told she would be allowed to see his body for ten minutes – and would have to remain handcuffed, with a Public Security Bureau (PSB) escort.

PSB officials have shown no respect for Hua Zaichen's wider family and friends either. More than a dozen officers raided his house on January 16 and seized 'Bike' Mingxuan, the prominent Beijing pastor who was praying for his dying friend. Pastor Bike, who is president of the Chinese House Church Alliance, has been ejected from Beijing several times recently. This time, he was put on a bus to Henan province.

In a more positive development, PSB officials have taken the unprecedented step of paying Pastor Bike some £1,800 in compensation for attacking his family and evicting them from their Beijing flat last October (*7x7 October 28, 2008*). Bike's son Zhang Jian suffered serious injuries in the assault. In response, Pastor Bike has dropped a legal suit against the PSB.

(Sources: China Aid, XE.com)

- Pray that Shuang Shuying will be allowed to see her husband before he dies.
- Thank God for the PSB's compensation payment to Pastor Bike – and pray that he and his family obtain justice for all that they have endured over recent months.

3. PAKISTAN

Blasphemy charges against a Christian teenager and four of his relatives have finally been thrown out by a judge – after an agonising wait of almost two years.

A judge in Punjab acquitted Rashid, his father Salamat and three of their relatives at a hearing on January 19 – but their lives are changed forever. Release partner CLAAS (Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement), whose lawyers acted on behalf of the Masih family, is now helping the family relocate for fear of being attacked by extremists.

Rashid was accused of blasphemy when he tore up a sticker depicting Islam's prophet Mohammed during a schoolboy squabble (*7x7, April 17, 2007*). His action sparked a riot: an 80-strong mob attacked the Christian district with stones.

Recently Pakistan's Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti has raised Christians' hopes by pledging to abolish Pakistan's notorious blasphemy laws.

Meanwhile, two Christian sisters aged 14 and 18 are embarking on a long legal battle for justice after being abducted, raped and forcibly converted to Islam. Two kidnappers held them for several days before handing them over to a pair of lawyers – who also tricked and abused the girls. Eventually, one of the girls managed to call the police and the alleged kidnappers and lawyers were arrested.

This is not the first reported instance of men abducting young Christian girls in Pakistan and forcibly converting them to Islam – often with impunity.

(Sources: Assist News, CLAAS, Compass Direct, The Voice of the Martyrs Canada)

- Ask God to heal the abducted sisters. Pray that their friends will not reject them.
- Thank God for the acquittal of Rashid Masih and family. Ask God to protect them.

4. BURMA

The authorities in Rangoon have banned church meetings in private homes – effectively shutting down most churches in the city.

More than 100 pastors from leading Rangoon churches were informed of the ban at a meeting called by local officials. They were told that churches would be sealed and leaders punished – even jailed – if the ban were flouted.

The 50 church leaders who attended the meeting were made to sign documents pledging to observe the ban. Christian Solidarity Worldwide reports that several churches have already been locked and sealed, including three in South Dagon Township.

Most churches are affected by the ban, sources told the Mizzima news agency. Only a few churches in Rangoon have their own land as the Burmese authorities stopped issuing churches permits for land ownership or construction in the late 1990s.

(Sources: Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Mizzima)

- Pray for wisdom for church leaders in Rangoon – and strong faith for members.
- Pray that this extra pressure on the church in Rangoon will cause it to grow.

Our next Prayer Alert issue will be on Tuesday, February 10, 2008.

This prayer alert is part of our 7x7 initiative to encourage prayer and action for seven years from 2002 for seven countries where Christians have faced intense persecution: China, Indonesia, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Sudan and Vietnam.

Through our international network of missions, we serve persecuted Christians in 30 countries around the world by supporting pastors and Christian prisoners, and their families; supplying Christian literature and Bibles; and working for justice. Release is a member of the UK organisations Global Connections, the Evangelical Alliance and the Micah Network.

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Sample letter to the Sri Lankan High Commission about the anti-conversion Bill

The correct form of address and politeness are important in Sri Lankan culture. Please use the High Commissioner's proper title and the correct spelling of his name, and use polite language.

Your Excellency

I understand that a Bill entitled 'Prohibition of forcible conversions', aimed at restricting religious conversion and religious activity, is to be presented for debate and voting in the Parliament of Sri Lanka very soon.

Such legislation, however well intentioned, may only succeed in creating a climate of religious disharmony. 'Unethical conversions' are, at best, materialistic enterprises and not genuine conversions. Such acts are a matter of concern to people of all religions and I do not condone such acts.

However, I believe that this proposed legislation is not an effective method of safeguarding individual freedom of religion for the Sri Lankan people, since such legislation can often be misused to harass and persecute minority religious groups or settle petty personal disputes.

I also believe that the majority of Sri Lankan Christians are law-abiding, upright citizens who contribute to society and your nation in many spheres and do not engage in unethical practices. They are also one of the smallest religious minority groups in Sri Lanka.

I respectfully call upon Your Excellency's Government to desist from the use of legislation as a potential tool against the exercise of free will and religious freedom of all citizens.

I am indeed aware of the difficult task that you and your Government are called to, in resolving the ethnic conflict and ushering in peace and prosperity in Sri Lanka. I am confident that you and your Government will attach equal weight and importance to the rights of religious minorities and ensure that the fundamental rights of all citizens are upheld.

May I thank you in advance for your attention to my request and wish you and your Government well in the difficult task of fair administration.

Yours respectfully,

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(your name)