

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

JAN-MAR 2021

voice

of Persecuted Christians

**THE
CONTINUING
IMPACT OF
COVID-19**

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



Welcome

by Paul Robinson, CEO

Helping
oppressed
Christians

The theme of this edition is Oppression: how persecuted Christians are oppressed around the world – and how your wonderful support is making a real difference to many in these very challenging circumstances.

You can read on page 6 how **Egyptian** believers have contended for their faith for many centuries. Despite their continuing experience of persecution, they put their trust in God and His provision with thanksgiving.

In **Central Asia** Christian communities must cope every day with a raft of legislation that restricts their fellowship, discipleship and evangelism (see page 16). Yet churches are growing, reaching out

using new technologies to overcome the challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.

China remains a state of repression: our report on page 18 details oppression in Xinjiang, the crushing of protest in Hong Kong, and the systematic persecution of churches, such as the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu.

This edition also includes our annual focus on **Persecution Trends** (page 10). These brief reports from partners – who are supported by your prayers and gifts – tell us that while the persecution of Christians in many regions is increasing, so is their bold faith, courage and trust in God.



Recycle this magazine: share it with a friend!



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reflects Amy Orr-Ewing

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

voice

of Persecuted Christians

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

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Faith under fire

Egyptian Christians attacked

Hundreds of villagers attacked the homes of Christians in Barsha, Minya governorate, Upper Egypt, at the end of November.

The violence occurred after rumours circulated that a Christian man had posted a comment on his personal Facebook page that was insulting to Islam, reports CSW. The man claims that his page had been hacked.

The assailants also attempted to attack the church of Abou Sefin, where the congregation was celebrating the beginning of the Coptic fast. A minibus belonging to the church was burnt, and several homes and properties were damaged, but no one was hurt.

• ***Please pray for peace and reconciliation in Minya.***

**Sign up to
Release**



Bob Fu threatened in bizarre campaign

*Protesters hold signs
attacking Bob Fu.
Photo: China Aid.*

A Release partner and leading campaigner for Christian freedom in China has received death threats and been hounded from his home.

Bob Fu and his family have been traumatised by bomb threats and protests that continued for weeks outside his home, but he insists his work will continue. The threats are part of a bizarre campaign to target Chinese exiles in several countries. Supporters of this campaign, themselves mainly Chinese, have been filmed attacking and beating victims on the streets.

The mayor of Bob's hometown in Texas told reporters: *'There are people who want Bob Fu eliminated, who would like to see his life ended.'*

Bob Fu said: *'I have no doubt this is directly from Beijing. The goal is clear. It's to silence my voice for freedom in China and to destroy the ministry of ChinaAid.'* But he insisted: *'We cannot let them stop us. Freedom has a price, and this is the price we are proud to pay for our faith and for freedom.'*

The threats have taken a toll on his family: his 15-year-old daughter had to be taken out of school by armed police. However, the family are now back in their home under police protection. Read more about China on page 18.

• ***Please pray for protection and healing for Bob and his family***

Pray for Algerian churches to reopen

Christians in Algeria have asked for prayer that the government will not discriminate in the reopening of churches closed due to Covid-19 since March.

In August the authorities decided to reopen places of worship gradually, beginning with mosques that can hold more than 1,000 worshippers.



Photo: Middle East Concern.

In October the government in Tizi Ouzou province, where most Algerian Christians live, listed 183 mosques which were allowed to open, including some known to hold less than 1,000 people. None of the 25 churches affiliated with the EPA (the umbrella organisation of Protestant churches in Algeria) were listed – and will remain closed because of the pandemic.

For three years authorities in Algeria have engaged in a systematic campaign against EPA churches, forcibly closing 13 fellowships and curtailing the activities of several others, reports Release partner Middle East Concern.

• ***Pray that all churches, both those closed as part of the government campaign against Christians and those closed due to Covid-19 restrictions, will be permitted to reopen soon.***

Check out our latest audio podcasts



If prison walls could speak

Jon Maltz and Chris Poch, the Directors of Artless Theatre Company, talk about their exciting new production based on Petr Jasek's book *Imprisoned with ISIS* which will be touring churches 2021-22 (see page 20).

In the footsteps of the Master Stephen is well-known as the first Christian martyr. But why exactly did he die, and what does it mean to be a Christian martyr today?

God is with us through the suffering Nigerian partner Hassan John provides some searching analysis of what lies behind the current violence in northern and central Nigeria. He also tells us how God is at work – even in the darkness.

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

Pakistan court invalidates marriage of abducted Christian girl



Christians in Lahore demand justice for Arzoo Raja. Photo: Sipa USA/Alamy Live News.

A high court in Pakistan in November reversed its decision to validate the marriage of a 13-year-old Christian girl to a Muslim alleged to have abducted and forcibly married her. The case had sparked an outcry from Christian leaders and rights groups.

On November 9 the court in Sindh Province invalidated the marriage of Arzoo Raja to Ali Azhar, 44, because she was underage. In October the court had refused to acknowledge documents proving Arzoo's age, and the judge, on releasing Arzoo to her 'husband', had apparently instructed police not to harass the newlywed

couple. The court, however, has not yet addressed possible charges against Azhar of statutory rape and forced conversion to Islam.

The court ruled that Arzoo should remain in a government safe house until she reaches the age of 18. While the court banned Azhar from visiting her, there is a concern that others may try to intimidate her.

• **We thank God for this reversal by the court. Pray for protection for Arzoo and her family, and for other young Christian girls who have been abducted, forcibly converted and married.**

Attacks continue in northeast Nigeria

Islamist militants in northeast Nigeria attacked a predominantly Christian village near Chibok, Borno state, in November, killing 12 Christians and kidnapping women and children.

In Takulashi, less than ten miles from Chibok, where Boko Haram terrorists kidnapped 276 Christian girls in 2014, the attackers arrived in trucks with automatic weapons and shot anyone in sight, said local resident Ishaku Musa.

'At the end of the shootings and looting, which lasted about two hours, 12 of our people in the community were killed, three women were kidnapped and also four children were abducted by the attackers,' he said. A church pastor was among those killed. Villagers suspect the attackers are members of Boko Haram, which seeks to impose *Sharia* (Islamic law) throughout Nigeria.

• **Pray for the families of those killed, and for the release of the women and children who have been abducted.**



PERSECUTION

An ancient problem in Egypt

Today's oppression of the Egyptian church has roots which go back a long way in its history, writes Release's Jack Norman.

I first met Martha, a Christian, in Upper Egypt in 2019. With her daughter at her side, we sat in her home as she shared her recent history with me.

Her husband had died a few years ago and her world had been shattered – but not just by his loss. Soon after his death she began to be approached on the streets by men from her community. First it was verbal threats, but it quickly turned into physical and sexual abuse, the details

of which are still so traumatic for her that it was hard for her to share them with me.

When I asked our partner if this would ever happen to a Muslim woman, she looked at me as if to say: 'What a ridiculous question!'

The house where I met Martha wasn't her marital home, which she had left as a result of these attacks, taking her children with her to try to rebuild their lives elsewhere.

Thankfully, with the help of Release partners, they are on their way to doing that, although it was evident from our short time together that the deep trauma of what had happened to them would remain for the rest of their lives.

'I have heard many heart-wrenching testimonies of those who convert'

This sort of oppression of Christians is an ancient problem in Egypt. We know from the scriptural accounts how the Israelites were oppressed there, and from the very early days of the church Christians in Egypt have been severely persecuted because of their faith.



For the past 1,400 years this oppression has had one source: the dominance of Islam in the country.

The seventh-century Pact of Umar laid out a long list of rules to be followed by those from other religions – rules which still influence the lives of many in Egypt today. These, for example, prohibit Christians from sharing the gospel with others in order to convert them. On visits to Egypt, I have heard many heart-wrenching testimonies of those who convert from Islam. If discovered, new believers may be abused, tortured or even killed unless they recant. In many cases, this persecution comes from within their own families.

Like Martha, believers who convert from a Muslim background may face violent abuse on the streets.

One family, who had recently turned to Christ, told me how one day their young son arrived home to say he had been beaten and robbed by a group of youths. They said that worse would follow if he reported the attacks to the police, including letting all their community know about their new-found faith. The family are now fearful of letting their son leave their house on his own.

Another oppressive and direct link to the Pact of Umar is the way Christians are very limited in their employment opportunities. Ancient rules which prevented non-Muslims from leading, governing or employing Muslims still have an impact on Christians today.

In recent months anti-racism campaigners have made us aware how oppression in one generation which negatively affects health, economic opportunity, or wealth accumulation for a particular group may diminish opportunities for later generations. Nowhere is this more true than for Christians in Egypt. The oppression they experience has been passed down from one generation to the next.

Economic crisis

Additionally in 2020, persecuted Christians in Egypt also had to cope with the pressures of the Covid-19 pandemic. As in other countries where Christians are marginalised and oppressed, the virus has worsened what was already a very difficult situation.

In particular, believers who are manual day labourers have suffered the most. Those who lost their employment in the collapsing economy have been left with no money to feed their families.

However, thanks to your support of our appeal last year for Christians affected by Covid-19, Release has provided direct help for several hundred families to feed themselves during the initial wave of the virus.



The epidemic has had a devastating impact on poor families, including many Christians.

One partner told me how a struggling Christian mother was overwhelmed when she received a vitally needed food package. She said that while she feared Covid-19 and its impact on her family, she feared more that her children would literally starve to death. She gave thanks to God that she was now able to stay at home and protect her family from the virus.

Praise to God

As I heard this moving testimony I was reminded of the words of the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 9. As he draws to an end two chapters encouraging the church in Corinth to give financially to help impoverished Christians in Jerusalem, he concludes with these powerful words:

‘This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God ...’ (verses 12-13)

I am so encouraged that the response of persecuted Christians in Egypt when receiving help is to give thanks to God, continuing to put their trust in His provision! ”



Rubbish is collected and recycled by hand in Cairo: most of the rubbish collectors are Christians who live in the poorer parts of the capital.

Growing through adversity

Thanks to your support, Christian women in Egypt have been able to strengthen one another throughout the Covid-19 crisis.

Many of the normal activities of our Strength to Stand (S2S) women's groups in Egypt came to an abrupt halt as the Covid-19 pandemic began to take hold.

Regular gatherings to train and equip team members had to be stopped, along with the regular visits to families in their homes. This deprived vulnerable Christian women of one of their primary support mechanisms.

However, over time ways were found to reconnect safely with these precious women, and we have recently heard how many have been helped practically through the crisis – even growing in their trust in the Lord through these challenging times.

Practical help and advice have been given by the facilitators to women such as Mariam, who lost her husband very early in the crisis. Deprived of the income he brought in, her Strength to Stand group quickly helped her to start a small project using her sewing skills to make and sell face-masks!



Members of a Strength to Stand group in Egypt keep their distance during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Another active S2S member, Gehan, was infected with the virus early on and quickly lost her strength and felt helpless. The group facilitators quickly put together a plan. After getting her to a medical centre to be examined, they made sure her drugs were safely delivered to her home and helped her to isolate.

Thankfully, after a short period of time she started to get well. She says she has learned a great lesson about how God is always there for His people, and how He brings other members of His Body to provide help and support at the right time.

Many of the women in the groups have faced the same sort of challenges we know about in the UK and Ireland, with some becoming depressed and anxious as their lives have been locked down.

Enduring faith

Yet some have said how they have used this time positively to grow in their relationship with God, and several of the women report that they have used these times to restore family times of prayer in their homes.

Through it all, those who lead these groups in Egypt have proved once again how they are able to stay resilient in the face of hardship.

The oppression these women face as a result of their Christian faith has not gone away, and Covid-19 has simply added to their problems, but they are an example to all of us in how we can use times of challenge to draw nearer to God.

RELEASE'S MINISTRY IN EGYPT



Thanks to your support, Release stands with persecuted Christians in Egypt:

- Helping to disciple believers from a Muslim background
- Providing food for poor families during the Covid-19 crisis
- Empowering vulnerable Christian women through our Strength to Stand groups



Population: 104 million

Capital: Cairo

Government: Presidential republic

Religion: Muslim (mostly Sunni) 87%; Christian 13%

While Egypt's constitution guarantees freedom of religion, Christians are treated as second-class citizens, especially Muslim-background believers.

Sources: World Factbook, Operation World.

Read more in
Embrace newsletter



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

YOUR OPPORTUNITY TO HELP OPPRESSED CHRISTIANS

In Egypt and other restricted nations around the world, Christians face persecution simply for following Jesus Christ.

Facing discrimination and oppression – and even physical attacks by militants – these courageous believers need our prayers and gifts to help them to stand strong.

Please would you consider making a financial gift today? Your support will encourage persecuted believers, reminding them that they have not been forgotten.

- use the attached card
- give securely online at releaseinternational.org
- call: 01689 823491

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2021

Key partners report on the pressures they are likely to face this year



Protest in Hong Kong

AFRICA



NIGERIA

Throughout 2020, Release partners have reported on the continuing brutal attacks on Christian communities by militant Fulani herdsmen.

'We have seen well-planned, well-orchestrated, systematic attacks on Christian communities that have nothing to do with a fight for grazing lands,' said partner Rev Hassan John.

'These attacks are driven by an Islamist ideology, aimed at destroying "the infidels" and, in many places, displacing them from their communities, while the government, by design or omission, turns a blind eye to the carnage.'

'The politically correct narrative which is easier for the international community to swallow – and which suits the Nigerian Government well – is to blame desertification and climate change.'

Release partner Mark Lipdo of Stefanos Foundation, said: *'The failure of governance in Nigeria has led to increased criminality with impunity.'* As a result Christians have suffered increasing attacks, including robbery and kidnapping for ransom.

Unless the authorities hold perpetrators accountable, and take measures to protect vulnerable communities, we can expect attacks against Christians to continue throughout 2021.

ERITREA

Some 300 evangelical Christians remain detained without trial inside repressive Eritrea where all evangelical and pentecostal churches are banned. In 2020 more than 60 Christian prisoners were released, many of whom had been in jail for ten years or more.

'However, we don't see any change in government policy. God is the only hope for our country. Keep praying,' said Release partner Dr Berhane Asmelash.

Persecution of Christians, repression, forced conscription and economic crisis will continue to force many Eritreans to flee to neighbouring countries as refugees in 2021.

KENYA

As in all locations, the coronavirus pandemic has severely limited the work of our Kenyan partner which serves believers from a Muslim background. *'Covid 19 has paralysed us, bringing almost all our activities to a standstill,'* said our partner. *'We couldn't hold our monthly fellowship meetings, seminars and annual conferences. We could not travel.'*

It reports that those who convert from Islam continue to face pressure and intimidation, as well as financial difficulties caused by Covid-19. These challenges will continue to impact persecuted Christians in the coming year.

EASTERN ASIA



CHINA

'The government of President Xi Jinping is increasing its "clean up" of anything that does not advance the communist agenda,' reported one partner. 'They appear to believe that they can achieve this by systematic opposition. They have bought freedom from censure due to many countries trading with China and regarding this trade as essential to their own economies.'

'Some non-registered churches were raided and closed in 2020. Increasing numbers of registered churches have had CCTV cameras installed in their church building as well as posters proclaiming communist ideals and beliefs.'

Our partner Bob Fu of China Aid has described how the government is exploiting Covid-19 to increase restrictions on underground believers.



A member of the North Korean military during a parade.

'The Chinese Government is trying every way to take advantage of the virus, by increasing the crackdown against Christian churches,' he said. 'It has accelerated particular campaigns, such as the forced demolition of crosses.'

Following the introduction of tough new rules controlling religion last year, persecution of Christians will continue in 2021. Read more about China on page 18.

NORTH KOREA

North Korea continues to prohibit all Christian activity. *'The policy against Christians has remained steady since at least the 1950s – and is arguably the longest, harshest persecution of Christians in recorded history,'* said Dr Eric Foley, CEO of our associate ministry Voice of the Martyrs Korea.

'It's hard to lock down an underground church. Not even authorities hostile to the gospel plus a virus can accomplish that. Accordingly, underground Christians in North Korea have viewed the coronavirus as an act of God that opens new opportunities for them, and the concomitant grace and resources to meet the requirements of those opportunities. This has been the most creative year we have witnessed in the underground church to date.'

More Bibles sent

For example, during 2020, despite the restrictions of Covid-19, our partner provided Bibles for North Korean Christians – distributing double the number compared to the same period the previous year.

While persecution will remain in 2021, our partner asks: *'Pray that the bold, patient Spirit of Christ which we see active in our underground church partners will be at work in us also.'*

SOUTH ASIA



PAKISTAN

Last year the blasphemy laws continued to be widely misused against Christians and other minorities – often to settle personal scores. In addition, Release partners still report the abduction, rape, and enforced conversion and marriage of Christian girls.

In fact Pakistan's Christians are likely to face oppression and discrimination throughout their lives: at work, at school and college, in accessing services and resources, and in the legal system. So persecution will continue in the coming year.

While some Christian workers were infected with Covid-19, and despite travel restrictions, our partners were able to provide food and medical assistance to vulnerable families.

Continued overleaf...

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2021

BJP rally in support of Prime Minister Modi.



INDIA

Christians and other minorities fear that Hindu nationalism and religious intolerance will continue to grow during 2021.

Hindu extremists attacked churches and individual believers throughout 2020. According to India's Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), Christians suffered 225 incidents of religiously motivated violence during the first ten months of 2020 – compared to 218 incidents in the same period in 2019. Many of these attacks were by vigilante mobs.

In September 2020, for example, Hindu extremists incited mobs of up to 3,000 people to attack Christians in three villages in Chhattisgarh state.

Since the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) took power in 2014 – and especially following the landslide victory of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May 2019 – there has been a significant rise in the number of attacks against Christians.

The coronavirus has also affected persecuted Christians. *'It has been a challenging task to reach out to the victims of violence during the outbreak of the pandemic,'* said Release partner the All India Christian Council. *'A number of frontline workers were infected with Covid-19 during the second wave in the middle of 2020.'*

SOUTH-EAST ASIA



MALAYSIA

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

Believers from a Muslim background have experienced the greatest persecution, which is likely to increase in 2021. *'We have more Sharia court cases, involving family law, more violent husbands throwing out their Christian wives, and neglected children caught in the middle of the battle,'* said our partner.

'Persecution is definitely increasing. The newly formed government is using the outbreak of Covid for their purposes and has closed churches all over the country.'

During 2020 Release highlighted the disappearance of Pastor Raymond Koh who was abducted in a military-style operation in February 2017 – and who has not been seen since.

CENTRAL ASIA

The states of Central Asia continue systematically to oppress Christians in a number of ways. *'Evangelism is officially prohibited by law in all countries of the region – allowing believers the right only to confess their faith, but not to spread it,'* said our partner 'Pavel'.

Most churches in the region must register with the authorities in order to hold Christian meetings – but this is often difficult or impossible for smaller congregations who do not have enough members to do so. Even registered churches that theoretically have the right to operate legally may be denied permission to buy or build church property.

In addition churches often have to provide personal data about their members. *'Believers fear that this private information could easily fall into the hands of Islamist or criminal groups,'* said our partner.

'Those who convert from Islam may be ridiculed and insulted, and are considered to be apostates and traitors,' said Pavel. For all these reasons, oppression and persecution are likely to continue against Christians in Central Asia during the coming year. Read more about Central Asia on page 16.

'It has been a challenging task to reach out to the victims of violence during the pandemic.'



Displaced Christians in northern Iraq. Photo: Reuters/Azad Lashkari.

'There is no doubt that the government is concerned that disillusioned Muslims are becoming Christians.'



IRAN

Christians in Iran have experienced persecution throughout the past year. *'This is part of a campaign to stop the spread of Christianity, to arrest those who are leading house churches and those who are involved in evangelism and teaching,'* said our partner.

'Persecution is on the increase because the authorities are aware of the growth in the number of converts and house churches and are determined at all costs to stem this. There is no doubt that the government is concerned that disillusioned Muslims are becoming Christians.'

'The very fear of persecution is a worry as believers meeting in their homes do not know if they are under surveillance or not. These pressures have led to an exodus of believers and Christian workers from Iran – and this is likely to continue in 2021.'

However, our partner reports that Covid-19 has created many new opportunities. For example, because of restrictions in travel, more believers have been regularly taking part in online meetings.



MIDDLE EAST



EGYPT

Egypt is home to one of the fastest growing populations in the Middle East and the largest Christian population in the Arab world. However, despite protection provided by the constitution, Christians will continue to suffer oppression and persecution during 2021. Most live as second-class citizens, experiencing discrimination in law, education and employment.

Converts from a Muslim background will continue to pay a high price for practising their Christian faith and

will face the harshest treatment: such as expulsion from their families, divorce instigated by their spouses, estrangement from their children and loss of employment. Read more about the persecution of Christians in Egypt on page 6.

IRAQ

Our partners continue to support persecuted Iraqi believers (pictured) and Syrian refugees who have fled to the autonomous region of Kurdistan in the north of the country. Many of these believers have applied for asylum.

'They still need help,' said our partner Jamal. *'In 2020 we provided food packages, housing, education and vocational training to hundreds of families fleeing war and persecution – and the numbers continue to rise.'* He expects there will be continuing need for support throughout 2021.

'While Covid-19 has limited our movement, it has not stopped us from getting supplies to the needy in our region.' In addition our partners have distributed Bibles and Christian literature.

'We thank God for Release which has enabled us to help Christian refugees in northern Iraq since 2014. Thank you so much for your support, for encouragement and standing with us.'

RESOURCES

What does it mean to live for Christ in such a way that faith impacts not only our private lives, but the lives of those around us?

LEARNING TO BE DISCIPLES

NEW

All for Jesus is a new small-group resource produced by Release that addresses these issues by exploring what Christian discipleship really means.

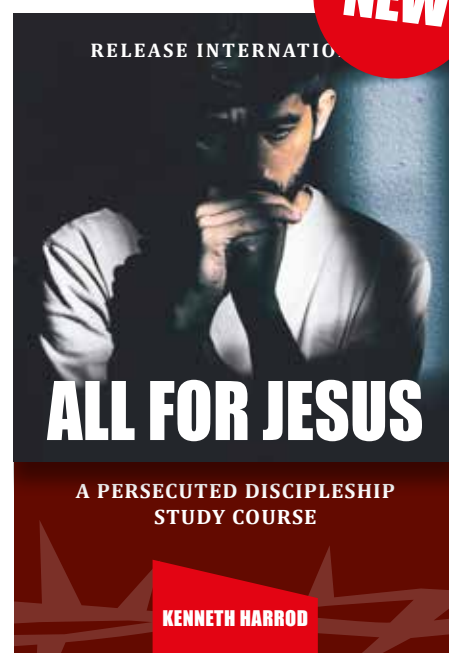
In five parts, each study focuses on a Bible passage and includes introductory notes and notes for group leaders. The studies focus on how disciples of Jesus are called to follow Him – whatever the cost.

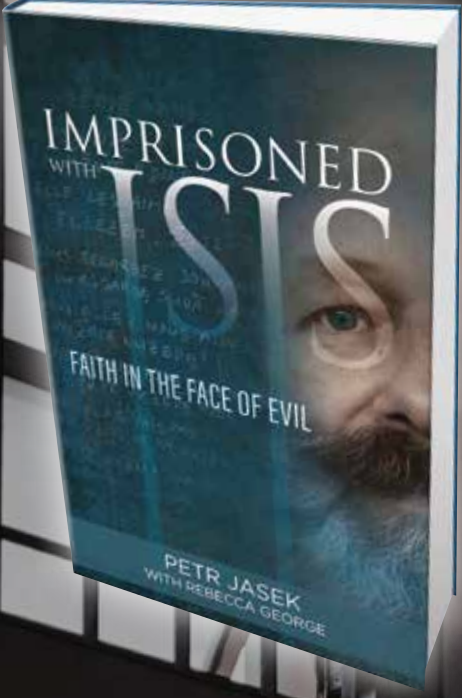
Why not speak to your church leader about using the *All for Jesus* course in your church's small groups this year? The booklets, priced at £4 each, are available for groups at a special price of £9 for packs of ten (with P&P).



Paul Robinson, Release 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.'*

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





IMPRISONED WITH ISIS

It was supposed to be a four-day visit to Sudan. It turned into a 445-day imprisonment, sometimes alongside hardened ISIS fighters.

Don't miss the inspiring new book by Petr Jasek of our associate ministry, Voice of the Martyrs USA.

Order the hardback today for £15 (including p&p) using the enclosed form, at releaseinternational.org or by calling 01689 823491.

Good News



Esther Experience on Zoom!

Determined not to let the coronavirus restrictions curtail her efforts to host an *Esther Experience* fundraiser, Scottish volunteer Joyce Dean (pictured) created a special online version of the women's pamper and awareness-raising event.

She packaged various items into beautifully wrapped boxes – Hazaq coffee, facial treatment, stones for painting, various food delicacies, and a complete set of instructions – and then delivered the boxes to her 25-plus invited guests. On the day of the event guests joined a Zoom video call, opened their boxes and were guided through the various items and activities all relating to the biblical story of Esther and its parallels with the experiences of persecuted Christian women across the world today.

Joyce said, *'It was an excellent day. The ladies loved their boxes; we were challenged by the story, we raised awareness, and we raised more than £400 to support Release Women's Strength to Stand projects. I plan to do more of these.'* Well done to Joyce and all who took part – what a fantastic effort!



Bangers and cash!



If you have an old car or write-off that needs to be scrapped, Giveacar can help you – and raise funds for persecuted Christians at the same time.

Giveacar provides a free collection and salvage or disposal service throughout the UK, and will donate a large portion of the proceeds to Release. Please visit giveacar.co.uk or call 020 0011 1664, quoting Release International as your preferred charity.

BUILDING THE CHURCH in Central Asia

While governments throughout Central Asia oppress Christians systematically, Release partner 'Pavel' and his team of co-workers are patiently strengthening churches in eight nations. Here he describes his important mission, and asks for your continuing prayers.

Currently, working with Release, we financially support the ministry of 22 Christian workers and their families throughout Central Asia. These bold believers are working to encourage and build local communities of Christians, by preaching and teaching, discipleship and pastoral care.

In the post-Soviet era, the states of Central Asia oppress Christians in a number of ways.

Evangelism is officially prohibited by law in all countries of the region – allowing believers the right only to confess their faith, but not to spread it. Most churches must register with the authorities in order to hold Christian meetings. However, this can

be difficult or impossible for smaller congregations since some authorities demand a minimum membership of at least 100 (Uzbekistan) or even 200 (Kyrgyzstan). Gathering in private homes is prohibited – even if the church is officially registered.

Churches applying for registration must often provide full details of each member, not only name, age, education, profession and place of work, but also home address, marital and family information, passport details and other personal data. Believers fear that this private information could easily fall into the hands of Islamist or criminal groups.

Registered churches that theoretically have the right to

operate legally may be denied permission to buy or build church property, so are prevented from meeting. They can distribute Christian literature to their members – but sharing any Christian literature outside the church is banned.

Those who convert from Islam may be ridiculed and insulted, and are considered to be apostates and traitors. The authorities may even indicate that they can no longer protect their civil rights.

Citizens from other countries are banned from taking part in Christian meetings and cannot legally be the leaders of churches and Christian organisations in the region. In addition, Covid-19 restrictions



Covid-19 restrictions in Central Asia have made travel impossible for Christian workers.

have also enabled the authorities to prevent visits by foreign Christian workers.

All these factors combine to ensure that Christians remain very much oppressed throughout Central Asia.

However, I want to positively note that there is a noticeable improvement in Uzbekistan.

During 2020, for the first time in many years, several evangelical churches were officially registered – including in the autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan, where, until now, there has never been a single registered church. Previously Christians there had been severely persecuted for their faith.

I myself well understand the needs of persecuted Christians, because during the time of the Soviet Union I spent time in prison for preaching the Word of God and advocating for the rights of Christians in the USSR.

My parents, and both of my grandfathers, were pastors of evangelical churches. From my earliest childhood I had a great interest in mission and planting new churches.

It is very important for us that we choose the right co-workers to support: they must be deeply dedicated to the Lord and devoted to their church ministry. While they may belong to different churches and different evangelical denominations, they must love the Lord, faithfully following Christ and preaching His Word.

By supporting pastors and their families, we are actually creating a key structure for the growth of the church in these countries that are hostile to Christianity. This is a serious investment in the future – and a very important prayer point as well.

New leader

I ask you to pray that the Lord will give me the ability to find such people. Eventually they need to become self-supporting. In a few years, due to my age, I will need to find someone who can replace me in this ministry so that it can continue in the future.

This new leader needs to have a vision for ministry in the countries of Central Asia, know well the people

and culture, and the history of the evangelical churches. This is an important focus of prayer for me, and I would appreciate it very much if you could join your prayers to mine.

My wife helps me a lot in my ministry. Please pray for her and her health. The work is great, there are many projects and we are constantly busy and often tired.

Some of the children of our co-workers are now university students – and they may be almost the only witnesses of Christ in their student environment. They are also key youth workers in their churches, forming the second generation of local Christians in their countries. We expect that some of them, like their parents, will become pastors and key workers in their nations. They need our prayers too.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, our Christian brothers and sisters are isolated from each other, as well as from the whole Christian world. So please pray that the quarantines can end. We really need face-to-face meetings and communications. We look forward to the restoration of personal contact and fellowship – as it was in the past.

Despite the virus, we give thanks to God that many churches have found new forms of ministry, learning to use new technologies to reach self-isolating church members – as well as to preach the Word of God to unbelievers. I think that ultimately this experience has enabled church leaders to grow and has taught them to be more self-reliant.

Dear Christian friends and supporters of Release in the UK and Ireland, on behalf of the many brothers and sisters in Central Asia, I would like to express great gratitude and appreciation for your friendship and co-operation.

I sincerely thank you all for your prayers and financial support for persecuted Christians. By the grace of God, together we are helping them to fulfil their ministry as witnesses of Jesus Christ.

In Jesus

Pavel



STATE OF REPRESSION

Christians in China face growing, systematic persecution by the communist government, reports Development Manager James Fraser.

Throughout its history the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has targeted and oppressed the Chinese church. The Cultural Revolution from 1966-76 was a particularly dark time. China closed itself off from the rest of the world and systematically attempted to eradicate the church – closing buildings, burning Bibles, and imprisoning or killing thousands of believers.

We should take serious note then, when experts such as Release partner Bob Fu, who has himself recently been the target of an outrageous smear campaign (see page 4), claim that what Christians are experiencing in China today is



President Xi Jinping.

comparable with the oppression of the Cultural Revolution.

Over the last decade China's growing influence in the world under the leadership of President Xi Jinping has grabbed the attention of the global media. More recently, alongside economic growth and

political influence, China's deplorable treatment of its ethnic Uyghur minority in Xinjiang and its strong-handed tactics to ban political dissent in Hong Kong have been in the spotlight.

As Release has continued to report, within this wider context Christians are also suffering increased pressure and restrictions in what is now one of the most sophisticated surveillance states in the world.

The north-western Chinese province of Xinjiang has been described as the largest outdoor prison in the world. It is estimated that perhaps more than one million citizens have been detained in what the government calls 'vocational training centres', essentially concentration camps. However, ubiquitous monitoring and the threat of detention for the most spurious offences, such as growing a



beard, having relatives living abroad, or simply being 'untrustworthy', make the whole region feel like one giant detention camp.

The majority of those affected are Uyghur Muslims but the government's strategy in Xinjiang, ostensibly aimed at countering the spread of terrorism and religious extremism, seems to be targeted at anyone who shows any sign of dissent.

This includes Christians, several of whom have also been interned or imprisoned, such as prisoner of faith Alimujiang Yimiti, who continues to serve a 15-year sentence for allegedly leaking state secrets.

'This situation is not only a humanitarian crisis but also a profound affront to God'

Combined with suppression of the Uyghur language and recent evidence of forced sterilisation programmes, the government's intent seems to be the complete eradication of Uyghur ethnicity and culture.

When we consider the biblical truth that Jesus died to ransom people from every tribe, language, people and nation, this situation is not only a humanitarian crisis but also a profound affront to God.

The new National Security Law passed in Hong Kong earlier last year has severely undermined the territory's partial autonomy. Christian activists and religious groups operating in Hong Kong could now be targeted by authorities in mainland China, especially those who are connected to international organisations.

This move does not bode well for the religious freedom of Hong Kong's 870,000 Christians. Boldly, in a recent statement in response to the new law, a group of Hong Kong pastors and believers pledged '[their] full embrace of the Gospel of the Kingdom, [their] sincere repentance towards the Church's shortcomings, [their] absolute refusal to authoritarian government, and [their] determination to walk together with Hong Kong society.'

Prominent among the churches that have been targeted on the mainland is Early Rain Covenant Church (ERCC) in Chengdu. Its pastor Wang Yi is currently serving a nine-year prison sentence for allegedly 'inciting subversion of state power.'

Recently, after being imprisoned himself, ERCC Elder Li Yingqiang and his family moved back to Chengdu to renew fellowship with scattered church members.

The police told him, *'We will never give your church any space. We will only continually squeeze you.'* Committed to the ongoing personal harassment of Elder Li, the police even constructed a temporary housing unit under his home to monitor his movements and prevent him from making contact with other church members.

After enduring nearly two months of such treatment, Elder Li and his family were forced to move to Leshan, 100 miles from Chengdu, where they continue to be intimidated by the police.

Elder Li, however, in a spirit which is typical of China's humble and courageous house church leaders, is determined to continue to serve God and His people.

'What does it mean to serve the Lord?' he said, 'It is to act according to His will and not our own. Suffering for the name of the Lord, suffering for the church of Christ, is a blessing that Christians all long for... When the sheep are facing wolves and tigers and leopards, it is the duty of the shepherd to protect them.'

Thanks to your continuing support, oppressed Christians in China are being helped to persevere.

Bibles and other Christian materials are being distributed, families of prisoners are being supplied with basic living expenses and legal defence is provided to those who are detained and convicted. As reported in the previous edition of *Voice*, Release is also assisting one particular network of persecuted pastors to continue to dedicate time to Bible teaching and pastoral care.

Please pray that Christians in China will continue to know the dignity and freedom they have in Christ in a context of increasing oppression. Pray also that the Holy Spirit would soften the hearts of officials in the Chinese Communist Party and help them to recognise the value that Christians can bring to Chinese society. 🇨🇳



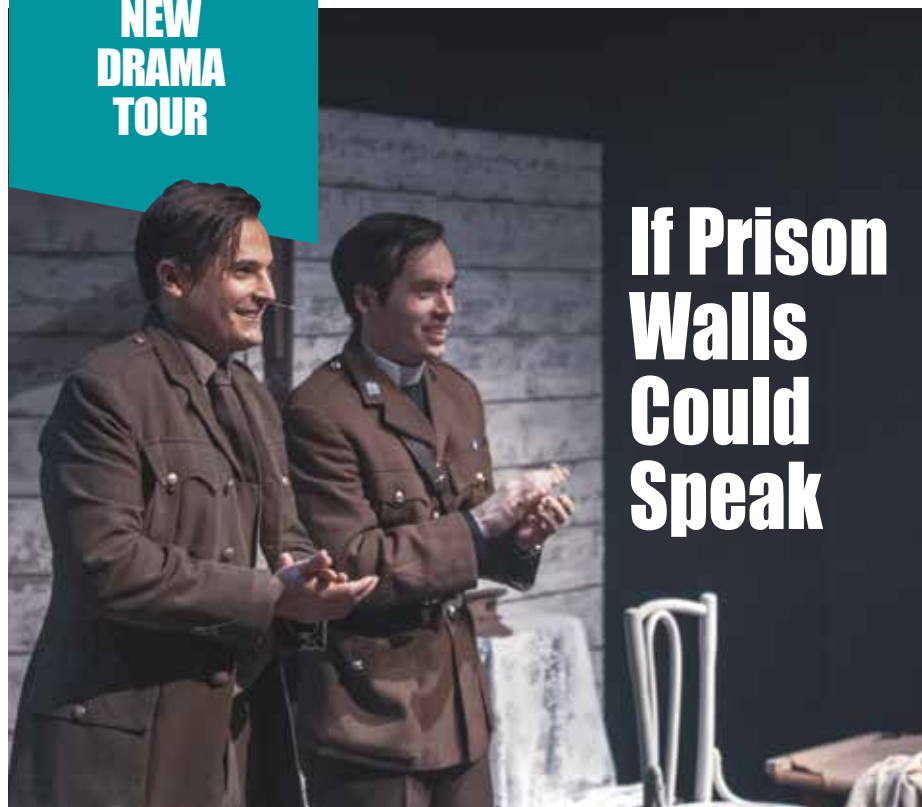
Population: 1.4 billion

Capital: Beijing

Government: Communist party-led state

Religion: Non-religious 44%, Chinese religions 29%, Buddhist 13%, Christian 8%, other 6%

Sources: Operation World, World Factbook.



If Prison Walls Could Speak

Release International and Artless Theatre are planning an exciting new drama which will tour churches in the UK during 2021, reports Laura Hayes, Director of Engagement.

“Do you know what waterboarding is?” they asked me. Yes, I said. I know what waterboarding is. Okay, but you don’t know how it feels, so we are going to show you.’

Petr Jasek, Imprisoned with ISIS.

Release is working with the Christian ministry Artless Theatre Company (artless.org.uk) to create a new drama, *If Prison Walls Could Speak*. The production is based on Petr Jasek’s powerful testimony of his experience in jail in Sudan, as told in his book *Imprisoned with ISIS*. The title of the drama comes from the book of sermons written in prison by Richard Wurmbbrand, the Romanian pastor who inspired the founding of Release in 1968.

The tour will take place in around 100 churches in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, starting in Summer 2021 and continuing until the end of 2022. We plan to deliver the tour both face to face in churches that are open, and via digital technology and social media where churches remain closed (if they are). We



Directors Jon Maltz (left) and Chris Poch.

continue to pray that the Covid-19 restrictions will be lifted as soon as it is safe and sensible to do so.

If you are interested in hosting a performance in your church, please email me at lhayes@releaseinternational.org.

The aim of Artless Theatre is to create performances that go beyond expectations of theatre and present a fresh perspective on Christianity. The name Artless is a statement of intent to create performance-experiences that are both accessible and exciting. The company started out putting on short performances to complement the outreach of regeneration Church

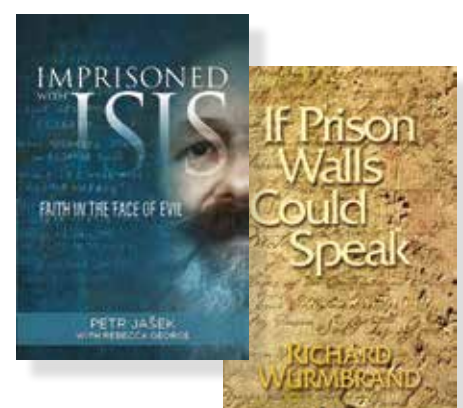
in Romford, Essex, but the dream was always much bigger.

We are so excited that the Lord has brought Artless to us. The regeneration Church showed our *Tortured for Christ* film last year, and Directors Chris Poch and Jon Maltz felt God calling them to talk to us about a new project to raise awareness of persecuted Christians. We hope that many churches will be willing to host this exciting tour this year and in 2022.



‘Don’t compare my thoughts in a solitary cell with your thoughts when you sit comfortably in a study. Try rather to understand what the millions of Christians in communist prisons have thought and think when beaten by terrible tempests.’

Richard Wurmbbrand, *If Prison Walls Could Speak*.



The hardback edition of Petr Jasek’s *Imprisoned with ISIS* is available for £15 including P&P. Richard Wurmbbrand’s *If Prison Walls Could Speak* costs £7 including P&P. Order online at releaseinternational.org, use the enclosed form or call: 01689 823491.

**RELEASE
AND YOUR
CHURCH**



ALL OUT FOR GOD!

Don't miss out on our forthcoming All Out for God (AO4G) to be held on Sunday, May 30.

Formerly our Great Outdoors Church Service, we started AO4G last year so that individuals could take part while maintaining Covid-19 restrictions. However, we hope that this year both individuals and churches will be able to participate.

'Recent UK government research has confirmed that Christians are the most persecuted faith group in the world. They face opposition from governments, terror groups and bigotry alike,' said Release CEO Paul Robinson.

'We, who are free, have this great opportunity to stand with persecuted Christians in prayer that they, too, may be free to practise their faith in freedom.'

See releaseinternational.org/all-out-for-god for the latest details, including free resources to help you and your church to pray for persecuted believers.

THANKS FOR TAKING PART



We hope you benefited from recent live online events, including the speaking tour by our Nigerian partner Hassan John (pictured) and the UK International Day of Prayer for the persecuted church (pictured above) hosted by the Evangelical

Alliance's Religious Liberty Commission, which includes Release. Thank you too for all your prayers for persecuted believers and our partners. If you missed out you can watch videos of both at releaseinternational.org/idop and on our YouTube channel [releaseinternational](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...).

INVITE A RELEASE SPEAKER

Our experienced speakers are available to join your church or online meeting to help you support and pray for persecuted Christians:



Ireland: Stephen on 028 9334 0014

London: Imtiaz on 07395 425507

Midlands & North: Kenneth on 07375 516408

Scotland: James on 07434 894016

South: Kenneth on 07375 516408

Wales & W Midlands: Paul on 07747 535588

Or call 01689 823491

THE WORD

Dr Amy Orr-Ewing, Christian apologist and author, reflects on how the creation story of Genesis 1 can help our understanding of pain and suffering.

WHY SUFFERING?

As we reflect together on the question of suffering, there are many different potential starting points.

You may be aware that Eastern philosophy views human suffering through the dual lenses of karma and reincarnation. When something painful happens, karma tells me that there is a moral law of cause and effect guiding the circumstances of our lives. If I get a disease or have an accident, the law of karma means I am getting what I deserve.

Islam gives us a different perspective. It has a monotheistic view of the world – there is one God – but it is a fatalistic religion teaching that a transcendent God is absolutely and directly in control of every aspect of the universe. As a consequence, human beings do not have real choice. There is only one will in the universe, and that is Allah's will. That is why the word *inshallah*, meaning 'if-God-wills-it' is so significant for Muslims.

God has made human beings in His image with a capacity to reason, choose and love.

A different point of view is offered by what we might call naturalism. Naturalism is the system derived from the belief that everything in life has a purely natural or physical explanation. In answer to the question 'Where is God in all the suffering?' naturalism would say, 'Nowhere – because God doesn't exist.'

Amid the potential starting places for considering suffering – naturalism, Buddhism or Islam – there is another alternative – it is the Judeo-Christian,

and specifically Christian perspective. This point of view sets forth the premises that God really does exist; that God is a personal being; that God is essentially loving; and that God has made human beings in His image with a capacity to reason, choose and love.

THE IMAGE OF GOD

In Genesis, the author talks about human beings created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Christian faith claims that there is a 'God-likeness' about us as human beings – that our lives are essentially valuable because we bear the divine image.

God located the people He made in a specific context (a garden) where they had the ability to choose (Genesis 2:15-17). The story tells us that all of the fruit on all of the many trees is available for the man and woman to eat except for one particular tree.

The existence of that choice demonstrates that they are not robots programmed and controlled by the creator; they have the independent decision-making capacity that makes meaningful and loving relationship possible. Both Adam and Eve exercise

their right to choose, and eat the forbidden fruit.

This story tells us that God, who is love, made a world in which love is possible and that this entails there being a world in which there is the possibility of choice. The idea put forward is that as human beings we have used our choices to harm as well as to love.

That is why there is injustice, darkness, pain and suffering in this world. Genesis describes the impact of the choices we have made on ourselves, on other people and upon the very environment of the earth. The first humans chose not to love God but instead to try to be God – to be the final authority over what is right and what is wrong.

In other words, moral choices impact not only ourselves, but also others and the very fabric of the universe.

Amy Orr-Ewing is a member of Release's Council of Reference.

Order Amy's new book, *Where is God in all the suffering?* (£8 with P&P) using the enclosed form or call: 01689 823491.

INSPIRING FAITH



'God will judge us not according to how much we endured, but how much we could love.'

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

JOIN US FOR A FANTASTIC WALKING CHALLENGE!

Take part in one of these great UltraChallenge walks – and raise funds for persecuted Christians at the same time.

Sept 4-5	SOUTH COAST	(Eastbourne-Arundel)	100km
Sept 11-12	THAMES PATH	(Putney Bridge-Henley)	100km
Sept 11	THAMES BRIDGES	(Putney Bridge - Tower Bridge)	25km
Sept 25	CHILTERN CHALLENGE	(Henley-Henley)	50km

Organised by Action Challenge, this is a great opportunity for supporters to ENJOY SOME FANTASTIC SCENERY while opting to support Release as their chosen charity. Full social distancing and anti-coronavirus measures APPLICABLE AT THE TIME will be in place.

Come as an individual or group, choosing to complete the whole route or a shorter section. **Find out more at ultrachallenge.com.**



THE DAY OF THE CHRISTIAN MARTYR

Tuesday, June 29, 2021

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

A FREE resource pack will be available in due course.



☎ 01689 823491 🌐 releaseinternational.org/martyrs

✉ martyrsday@releaseinternational.org

🐦 #IWillNotAbandonThem



Will you leave a legacy of enduring faith and love?

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

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

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

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

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
Voice
of Persecuted Christians



ALL OUT FOR GOD

**Sunday,
May 30, 2021**

*Stand in solidarity
with persecuted
Christians
worldwide*

#AllOut4God

Find out more:

 [releaseinternational.
org/all-out-for-god](https://releaseinternational.org/all-out-for-god)

 [releaseinternational](https://facebook.com/releaseinternational)

prayershield

January–March 2021



A young woman worships in a house church near Vientiane, Laos.

JANUARY 2021

*Heavenly Father,
You hear the cries of the
oppressed and, in Your great
compassion, You respond
(Nehemiah 9:27). You are the
One who sets us free.*

*Thank You, Lord, that You
are Defender, Deliverer and
Redeemer for our persecuted
family.*

*Fight their cause, Lord, and
deliver justice for them. Though
their enemies lay snares and
traps for them, lead them out
into wide, open spaces where
they can walk with You in
freedom and in peace.*

*In Jesus' name,
Amen*

LAOS

FRIDAY 1: Lord, at the start of a new year, we declare Your Lordship over all the earth, including those nations such as Laos where Your people are persecuted. We pray that Your will be done and Your kingdom come.

SATURDAY 2: Ask God to bless and protect His people in Laos. Christians represent about two per cent of the country's seven million people, most of whom are Buddhists.

SUNDAY 3: Pray for a change of heart among Laos' majority Buddhists who often view Christians as traitors practising a 'foreign' religion.

MONDAY 4: Officials in Saravan province recently drove out of their homes two families from Pasing-Kang for refusing to renounce their faith. Pray for these believers, now forced to live in the nearby forests.

TUESDAY 5: Thank God for the Lao Government's recent attempt to promote a 2019 law for the 'protection and awareness' of Christians. Pray that the law will be respected and upheld across the country, including in rural areas.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians

WEDNESDAY 6: Pray for three Christian families from the Akha tribe (pictured, right) who were expelled from their village after refusing to renounce their faith in Christ. Release associate ministries helped resettle them.

THURSDAY 7: Village leaders loaded the Akha Christians (above) on to a truck, drove them out of the village, left them by a roadside – then burned down their homes. Pray that God will restore all the families have lost.



Release associate ministries helped to resettle three Christian families expelled from their village in Laos.

EGYPT

FRIDAY 8: Christians in Egypt are discriminated against and have very limited work opportunities. Pray that God will provide for them and cause their businesses to flourish.

SATURDAY 9: Ask God to heal Martha who suffered abuse as a Christian widow in Upper Egypt and who still experiences trauma as a result (see *Voice*, pages 6–9).

SUNDAY 10: Pray for a young boy who was recently beaten and robbed by a gang of youths – because his family had turned to Christ. They threatened to tell others of the family's conversion if he reported the attack.

MONDAY 11: Ask God to protect Christians in Egypt who have a Muslim background. Many suffer abuse or violence; some are even killed.

TUESDAY 12: Thank God that Release was able to provide

food and other essentials for several hundred persecuted Christian families in Egypt at the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

WEDNESDAY 13: Please continue to pray for our Strength to Stand (S2S) women's groups in Egypt. Pray that members of these support groups will continue to grow in confidence as friendships blossom.

THURSDAY 14: Pray for S2S group member Mariam, who lost her husband early in the pandemic. Her group helped her to start a small project making and selling face masks.

FRIDAY 15: Thank God that S2S group member Gehan has recovered from Covid-19 and has learnt about God's love and provision through the support of her friends.

MALAYSIA

SATURDAY 16: Continue to pray for the family of Pastor Raymond Koh who was abducted off the street in Malaysia four years ago. His kidnapping has been blamed on Special Branch police.

SUNDAY 17: Pray that Release's recent petition calling on the Malaysian Government to explain the disappearance of Pastor Raymond (above) will send a strong message that he is not forgotten and help lead to the disclosure of his whereabouts.

MONDAY 18: Ask God to strengthen Pastor Raymond's wife, Susanna Liew, who has vowed to take 'relentless action' to press for his release.

TUESDAY 19: Pray for the family of Pastor Joshua Hilmy and his wife Ruth who went missing in 2016 after he

inquired about changing his religious status on his identity card from Muslim to Christian.

PAKISTAN

WEDNESDAY 20: Pray for Asif Pervaiz who was sentenced to death for blasphemy in September, after seven years in custody. He had refused to convert to Islam or participate in Muslim prayers at work. Pray his appeal will be successful.

THURSDAY 21: Pray for the family of Asif (above). His wife, Marilyn, and their children are now in hiding. Release partners are supporting Asif and his family.

FRIDAY 22: Pray for Christian prisoner Zafar Bhatti who reportedly suffered a heart attack in September. He has been in jail since 2012 and was given a life sentence in 2017. Pray his appeal will be heard soon.

SATURDAY 23: Praise God that the police rescued a 13-year-old girl who had been abducted and allegedly converted to Islam by force. Sindh High Court had previously ruled that the marriage was legal.

SUNDAY 24: Continue to pray for a 14-year-old girl who was abducted at gunpoint near Faisalabad and forced to marry her kidnapper. Recent reports suggest she managed to escape and has gone into hiding.

MONDAY 25: Pray for a 15-year-old who remains in captivity since being abducted in Sindh

province in October 2019, despite her family's efforts to secure her freedom through the courts. Some reports say the girl is now pregnant.

TUESDAY 26: Pray that the abductors of the teenage girls in recent days' prayers will repent of their actions and free the girl who is still captive.

ERITREA

WEDNESDAY 27: Praise God for the release on bail in September of 31 Christians who had been detained in Mai Serwa prison without charge or trial for years, some for more than a decade.

THURSDAY 28: Thank God that the Eritrean Government ordered the release on bail of 22 Methodist Christians from prison in July.

FRIDAY 29: The reasons behind recent prisoner releases have not been given, though some have linked it to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is understood those who have been freed must not leave the country. Pray that they will not be returned to jail.

SATURDAY 30: Pray for five Christian women arrested in Eritrea when they took to the streets to celebrate the release of a total of 69 Christians freed last summer.

SUNDAY 31: Release partners estimate that there are 300 Christian prisoners of faith in Eritrea. Others estimate there could be many more. Thank God that He knows their names and holds them dear.

FEBRUARY 2021

CHINA

MONDAY 1: Pray for groups in China who face being persecuted for meeting to study God's Word, like the group pictured. Pray that the Bible will nourish them, and be like a sword to defend them (Ephesians 6:17).

TUESDAY 2: Pray for a pastor and his wife who were temporarily detained following a raid on their church's summer camp last year. Officials said the church in Gushi did not have permission to hold the event.

WEDNESDAY 3: Officials who raided the Gushi church camp (above) reportedly acted on a tip-off from residents – after the authorities offered rewards for reports of non-



approved religious events. Pray for good relationships between churches and their neighbours.

THURSDAY 4: Thank God for Pastor John Cao who, in a recent letter from prison, says he has not stopped praying for the health, peace and faith of others. Pray for John's elderly mother who was recently barred from visiting him.

FRIDAY 5: Continue to pray for Christians in areas of China facing intense repression, such as among the Uyghurs in Xinjiang province. Pray that their witness will lead many to turn to Christ.

SATURDAY 6: Uyghur Christian Alimujiang Yimiti continues to serve a 15-year sentence in Xinjiang for allegedly leaking state secrets. Pray for him, his wife Gulinuer and their two sons.



Believers in rural China meet for Bible study.

SUNDAY 7: Continue to pray for Pastor Wang Yi of Early Rain Covenant Church, Chengdu, who is serving a nine-year prison sentence for allegedly 'inciting subversion of state power'.

MONDAY 8: Pray for Early Rain Covenant Church elder Li Yingqiang and his family who have been continually threatened and harassed by police. Officers have set up a base under the family home.

TUESDAY 9: Elder Li (above) says: 'Suffering for the name of the Lord... is a blessing... When the sheep are facing wolves and tigers and leopards, it is the duty of the shepherd to protect them.' Pray that Christians in China will experience God's presence and protection.

WEDNESDAY 10: Ask God to breathe His life into Christians' endeavours to spread the gospel across China, and pray for wisdom and strength for church leaders.

THURSDAY 11: Pray for a network of persecuted pastors whom Release is supporting to enable them to continue to dedicate time to Bible teaching and pastoral care.

FRIDAY 12: Praise God for the powerful witness of Liu Zhenying, also known as Brother Yun or 'the Heavenly Man' after his autobiography's title. Pray that the church will indeed 'arise' as he urged in a recent event online.

SATURDAY 13: Pray for Bob Fu of our partner China Aid who

has been the target of a recent smear campaign. Pray that God will silence these accusations and protect Bob's good name.

CENTRAL ASIA

SUNDAY 14: Pray that God will bless the work of our partner 'Pavel' as he supports Christian workers across this region (see *Voice*, pages 16-17). Ask God to use Pavel's own experience of persecution, including imprisonment, to build others' faith.

MONDAY 15: Pray for the Christian workers and their families whom Pavel and Release support in Central Asia as they work to build up local communities of Christians, by preaching and teaching, discipleship and pastoral care.

TUESDAY 16: Pray for Christians throughout Central Asia who often suffer oppression, especially those with a Muslim background. Evangelism is prohibited and all churches must register with the authorities.

WEDNESDAY 17: Praise God for recent improvements in Uzbekistan. For the first time in many years, several evangelical churches were officially registered in 2020.

THURSDAY 18: Pray for New Life Protestant Church which lost its appeal against officials' plans to seize two of its buildings in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The properties are partly used to house and minister to those suffering from drug misuse.

FRIDAY 19: In September, Grace Presbyterian Church and Agape Pentecostal Church lost their court battle against confiscation of their buildings on the same site in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan. Pray that both their appeals will succeed.

SATURDAY 20: A recent national census in Tajikistan asked people to reveal their religious beliefs, prompting concern that data might be used to target faith groups. Pray that the Tajik authorities will work to improve their religious rights record.

SUNDAY 21: Pray that God will raise up many more church builders and church leaders in the region, with a heart for spreading the gospel.

IRAN

MONDAY 22: Pray for Christian couple Sam and Maryam who risk losing their adopted daughter after the courts ruled they were not fit to be parents. Judges consider the child to be Muslim even though her parentage is unclear. Pray the couple's appeal will be successful.

TUESDAY 23: Pray for justice for Sam and Maryam (above), who were arrested for their faith in 2019. Sam was sentenced to one year in prison and two years in exile; Maryam, a nurse, was banned from working in the public sector.

WEDNESDAY 24: Continue to pray for four Christians from

God's kingdom is advancing in Iran.



Rasht – Ramin Hassanpour and his wife Saeede, Hadi Rahimi and Sakine Behjati – who were given prison sentences ranging from two to five years in August for being part of a house church. Pray that their appeals will be heard quickly.

THURSDAY 25: Praise God for the steadfast faith of Iran's Christians. One persecuted Christian who is currently serving two years' internal exile has talked of seeing himself and his suffering as 'a piece of the puzzle in the greater image God is creating'.

FRIDAY 26: Continue to pray for Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz and his wife, Shamiram, as they settle into their new life outside Iran. They were forced to leave after harsh prison sentences against them were upheld.

'My "belongings" were the people I served for 45 years... Being separated from these dear people is extremely difficult.'

Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz on leaving Iran

SATURDAY 27: Thank God that a new charge brought against Christian convert Ebrahim Firouzi has been dropped for lack of evidence. Ebrahim is currently in internal exile, serving a three-year sentence. He was detained from 2013 to 2019.

SUNDAY 28: Pray that the Iranian authorities will stop persecuting believers who have converted to Christianity, including Ebrahim (above), and instead uphold their religious rights.

MARCH 2021

ALGERIA

MONDAY 1: Thirteen churches in Algeria remain forcibly closed and sealed – and their congregations are still without a meeting place. Pray they will reopen soon.

TUESDAY 2: Please continue to pray for members of two large Protestant churches shut in October 2019, in Tizi-Ouzou and Makouda.

WEDNESDAY 3: After Covid-19 restrictions on places of worship were eased in Algeria late last year, churches were not included in phased reopening plans. Pray for an end to such discrimination.

THURSDAY 4: Ask God to protect and grant His wisdom to church leaders in the face of ongoing persecution in Algeria. Thank God for the resilience of Algerian believers.

FRIDAY 5: Last year, the Government collected data on the religious affiliations of teachers in Tizi-Ouzou province in a move seen as an attempt to intimidate Christian and atheist teachers. Pray that Christians will not be cowed into hiding their faith.

SATURDAY 6: Pray for President Abdelmadjid Tebboune who came to power in 2019 promising social reform. Pray that his Government will recognise the importance of religious

freedoms and take steps to uphold them.

SUNDAY 7: Pray that regulations governing non-Muslim worship will be amended so that Christians will be able to worship freely.

INDIA

MONDAY 8: Jagra Kashyap and his son Asharam have gone into hiding in Chhattisgarh state after Hindu extremists attacked them. Jagra's hearing was permanently damaged: ask God to heal him.

TUESDAY 9: Pray for the other Christian families in the same village as Jagra and Asharam (above): more than ten have been attacked as extremists try to persuade them to renounce their faith.

WEDNESDAY 10: Pray for believers in Dhamtari district, Chhattisgarh state: Hindu extremists have been subjecting them to death threats, sexual harassment and false accusations in the media.

THURSDAY 11: Pray for Pastor Vinouwa Das and his wife, Punita, in Jhikatia, Bihar state. Hindu extremists recently beat them and their new-born baby with sticks, insisting he stopped leading church services. The mob included people who had been in Pastor Vinouwa's church but who had been pressured to recant their faith.



People continue to turn to Christ in India, despite the severe threat of persecution.

FRIDAY 12: Hindu extremists beat Pastor Raj Singh and four other Christians, shaved part of their heads, then paraded them through the streets of Bherikudar, Jharkhand state, for turning to Christ and allegedly eating beef (which many Hindus consider taboo). Pray for justice for these five.

SATURDAY 13: Christians in Bherikudar (above) took turns to keep watch over Christian families at night. Pray that officials will take action to ensure believers are safe and their attackers do not feel they can act with impunity.

SUNDAY 14: Hindu extremists have stepped up their opposition to Christians, and are trying to turn tribal communities against them. Groups in several states including Jharkhand are now



demanding the withdrawal of benefits to Christian members of their tribes. Pray against such divisiveness.

SRI LANKA

MONDAY 15: Please pray for the emotional, physical, and spiritual protection of Christians in Sri Lanka as they seek to live out their faith.

TUESDAY 16: A pastor and his family were assaulted when a mob raided the Jesus Witness Church in Batticaloa district. Pray for repentance for the Hindu leaders believed to be implicated in this attack.

WEDNESDAY 17: A recent Christian funeral in Batticaloa was halted when about 50 villagers demanded that the funeral be conducted according to Hindu rites.

Thank God police intervened so the funeral could continue.

THURSDAY 18: Pray that Sri Lankan Christians' witness will serve as a powerful testimony to those around them, so that many will turn to Christ.

FRIDAY 19: Pray that God's people in Sri Lanka will continue to play the role of peacemakers between different ethnic and religious groups – and that their contribution will be valued.

NIGERIA

SATURDAY 20: Pray for Christians in Plateau, Kogi and Kano states affected by violence in October. When believers took to the streets to protest peacefully against violence by security forces, mobs took advantage of the unrest to attack churches.

SUNDAY 21: Pray for Christians at the Dunamis Christian Centre in Anyigba, Kogi state. After the church held a prayer walk, a mob raided their meeting, beating and shooting at people. A bishop and four pastors were among the injured.

MONDAY 22: Pray for a return to peace in southern Kaduna state where Fulani militants have taken over more than 100 Christian villages, displacing 50,000 people. Christians who have tried to return have been killed.

TUESDAY 23: Continue to pray for an end to kidnappings

in Kaduna. Christian leader Bege Katuka was one of 22 people abducted in the state in September alone. Three people for whom ransoms had been paid were found dead.

WEDNESDAY 24: Thank God for the release of Rev Polycarp Zongo from Jos, Plateau, who was captured by militants of the Islamic State West Africa Province in October but freed after 11 days.

THURSDAY 25: In October armed Fulani killed David Titus near Bang village, Adamawa state. The previous day, Kennedy Bitrus from the same village was attacked with machetes – but survived. Pray for justice for both men.

FRIDAY 26: Thank God that church elder Ibrahim Garba survived being shot in the stomach and that his twin daughters, Hassana and Hussaina, were released three days after being kidnapped in Katsina state.

SATURDAY 27: Pray for the family and friends of Justine Patrick who was abducted and killed as he returned to Chaha village in Plateau state. His two companions, Daniel and Sele, managed to escape.

SUNDAY 28: Christian community leader Bulus Chuwang Janka was lured out of his home in Rasat village, Plateau, with a phone call – then murdered. Pray for his wife, Chundung, and their son, who saw him die.

MONDAY 29: Plateau state Governor Simon Lalong

Many thousands of children like this girl continue to be displaced by violence and unrest in north-east Nigeria.



recently said: 'Innocent people cannot be killed without anybody being apprehended and put to trial.' Pray for an end to the killings and that those responsible will be brought to justice.

TUESDAY 30: Please pray for God's protection over our partners in Nigeria, courageous believers such

as Archbishop Ben Kwashi, Rev Hassan John and Mark Lipdo of the Stefanos Foundation who serve persecuted Christians and speak up for their rights.

WEDNESDAY 31: Pray that God will build unity in the church in Nigeria so that it might be a beacon of light throughout the nation.

Sources: AsiaNews; China Aid; Forum 18; International Christian Concern; Middle East Concern; Morning Star News; Release Eritrea; Release partners and contacts; VOM Canada; VOM USA.

Names in inverted commas have been changed to protect identities.

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

*Lord Jesus,
Living Word, You cut through the
lies of the enemy like a double-
edged sword (Hebrews 4:12).*

*Lord, I thank You for the
hope You embody and Your
'incomparably great power for
those who believe', the same
power that raised You from the
dead (Ephesians 1:19-20).*

*Teach my persecuted brothers
and sisters to lean on You and
put ever more trust in You, the
One who makes a way – and
please, Lord, do the same for me.*

Amen

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