

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

JAN-MAR 2022

voice

of Persecuted Christians

**STANDING WITH
OPPRESSED
BELIEVERS**

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



Welcome

by Paul Robinson, CEO

**Oppressed for
following Jesus**

Today it is estimated that more than 300 million believers around the world face oppression and persecution – simply because of their Christian faith.

We see that oppression in the systemic discrimination and ill-treatment of believers in nations where Christians are treated as second-class citizens. In these states members of the Christian minority often endure a lifetime battle against mistreatment in law, in education, in employment and in access to services and resources. In many cases they risk false accusation and public vilification for choosing to follow their Saviour.

That's why Jesus promised to bless His oppressed followers, both now and forever:

'Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven' (Matthew 5:11–12).

The theme of this edition is Oppression: how Christians are oppressed around the world – and how your prayers and gifts are making a real difference in so many different ways.

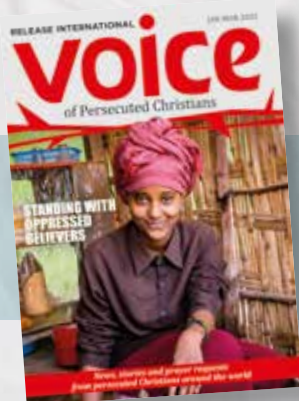
In **Afghanistan** (page 6) Christians face an uncertain future following the return to power of the hard-line Taliban. Yet many believers remain undaunted, and our partners are committed to sharing the gospel and strengthening new disciples through innovative Christian media.

In **Central Asia** (page 14) churches face a huge raft of legislation and practices designed to restrict their religious freedoms – and yet, just as it says in Colossians 1:6, the gospel 'is bearing fruit and growing'.

In **Sri Lanka** (page 16) pastors and their families continue to be oppressed by Buddhist extremists and their allies. You can read how your support is helping the children of those families to receive vital support and a Christian education.

This edition also includes our annual focus on **Persecution Trends** (page 10). These brief reports from selected partners indicate the forms of persecution and oppression our global Christian family will be facing this year. Please use this to prompt and inform your prayers.

Thank you so much for also continuing to partner with Release International to support our precious brothers and sisters around the world.



Recycle this magazine: share it with a friend!



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RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
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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

Pray for Algerian church leader

Algerian Christians request prayer for Pastor Salah Chalah, senior pastor of the largest Protestant church in Algeria. He, along with three others, was due to be summoned to court in December.

The charges against the pastor include 'calling for the disobedience of laws by a clergyman', 'practising non-Muslim rites without permission' and 'calling to organise an unarmed assembly' (a demonstration). In the past four years, the authorities have closed 16 Protestant churches, and ordered several more to do so. Pray that all charges are dropped and that churches are allowed to reopen.

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Release**



Chinese churches told to celebrate communist martyrs



Performers celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party in July 2021. Photo: Reuters/Carlos Garcia.

Christians in China are forbidden from remembering their own martyrs – but are required to celebrate the martyrs of the Red Army.

In September 2021, government-sanctioned churches in every province were 'invited' to organise prayer and worship events to commemorate the 76th anniversary of Japan's surrender in China at the end of the Second World War. Although other forces were

involved in the military victory, it is only martyrs of the Red Army who can be remembered. Churches were required to submit evidence of their involvement in the celebrations.

Consequently one state church in Shanxi province organised an event at the Heroic Revolutionary Martyrs Memorial Tower which commemorates the communist martyrs of the civil war. It is inscribed with Chairman Mao's signature and the words, 'Long live the martyrs.'

Release International partner Bob Fu of China Aid said, *'This is another horrendous example of the government stripping Chinese Christians of their identity and expression. Xi Jinping's regime will not stop until he has replaced God as the ultimate authority.'*

While state churches are compelled to participate in events which glorify the Chinese communist party and attempt to further 'Sinicize' Christianity, faithful house churches continue to face systematic persecution.

• **Pray that God will show church leaders how to respond to these new pressures.**

Malay Christians fear new sharia legislation

In Malaysia, Christian converts from Malay backgrounds are increasing but, if caught, risk being severely punished. Christianity is not illegal, but no Malay churches can meet openly, and no Malay Christian may own a Bible.

Sources convey concern about the increasing push for new pro-Islamic legislation. They describe the restrictions of new sharia (Islamic laws), currently awaiting parliamentary approval, which look to control any development of non-Islamic religions. The oppressive efforts include the possible inclusion of hudud (Koranic punishments) and increased strength for sharia courts, making them equal in power with the civil courts.

During recent times, the indigenous people from Sarawak have felt the

beginnings of such intolerance. Some children have been automatically registered as Muslim, despite the area being majority Christian. Many parents realised too late and have made subsequent challenges to the authorities. However, one source said: 'None of the legislation has been changed.'

If the new laws are implemented, Christians fear that converts from a Muslim background will be targeted. *'Many of our congregation are afraid to come for fellowship and even online meetings,'* said a local pastor. *'We need your prayers now more than ever...we are alone and without protection.'*

• **Pray for protection for new converts and that these new laws will not be implemented.**

Listen to our latest podcasts



How will you have celebrated Christmas? Release International partner Rev Waseem Khokar lives and works in Pakistan, where he helps Christian families who are marginalised and vulnerable. Discover what Christmas looks like for those rejected by society, and hear about their wholehearted determination to celebrate the birth of Jesus, despite the challenges they face.

Elect exiles What if you were under attack and fleeing was your only option? Millions of Christians around the world today face that stark reality, many specifically because of persecution. Release International workers Kenneth and James talk about some of the places where Christians have been forced to flee, and how the issue of displacement is covered in the New Testament.

Jamal: from building palaces to strengthening faith Our partner Jamal Liddawi shares his miraculous story. For over 30 years God has worked in his life, and today he leads our partner, Hand of Help, which serves displaced Christians in northern Iraq. Listen in as he shares his journey of faith and how he came to minister to persecuted believers.

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

Bail for nurses charged with blasphemy

Two Christian nurses in Pakistan who were charged with 'defiling the Koran' last year have been granted bail.

Usually those charged under Pakistan's widely condemned blasphemy laws languish in jail for years until they are released on appeal. Nurse Mariam Lal and student nurse Navish Arooj received bail in September, according to their lawyer.

The nurses were charged in Faisalabad under Section 295-B of Pakistan's blasphemy law after an Islamist mob entered their workplace, Faisalabad Civil Hospital, in April last year and demanded 'death to blasphemers'.

A co-worker at the hospital also attacked Mariam with a knife.

'Both women are currently in a safe location,' said the nurses' lawyer Atif Jamil Paggan. 'They are very happy and relieved after this court victory, and we are optimistic that the court will absolve them of the charge once the trial concludes.' In Pakistan, defiling the Koran is punishable by up to 10 years' imprisonment and/or a fine.

• Thank God that bail has been granted. Pray that all charges against Mariam and Navish are dropped.



Pastor martyred in Taraba state, Nigeria

A medical doctor and pastor who led a holistic Christian ministry in northeast Nigeria was shot to death in October.

Dr Habila Solomon, based in Jauro Yinu village, Taraba state, was killed at his home in the village by Fulani militia, according to Morning Star News. *'He was a great encouragement to many people,'* said one pastor. Dr Solomon regularly visited Fulani villages to share the gospel and to provide free medical care.

• Pray that God will comfort the family of Dr Solomon.

Indian believers beaten by mob

Hours after a Hindu nationalist mob in central India assaulted and held more than 60 Christians against their will, police temporarily detained the Christians rather than the assailants.

The group of about 500 Hindu militants attacked the Christians in October as they gathered for dinner in Oteband village, Durg district, Chhattisgarh state.

The mob searched their belongings, harassed and physically assaulted church members, witnesses said. Videos on social media showed the attackers forcing believers to line up as they searched their belongings and clothes.

'Some men took me inside the house, where one person slapped me three or four times,' said Anil Tandon, who hosted the meeting of The Pentecostal Mission church in Raipur. *'When we were taken before the village panchayat [council], I was beaten there too.'* The mob also vandalised vehicles, witnesses said.

A number of church members were temporarily detained by the police; Anil was accused of forcible conversion and released on bail. While the police filed a First Information Report against the mob, no individuals were identified, reported Morning Star News.

• Pray that all charges against Anil will be withdrawn and that the perpetrators will be brought to justice.



Stock photo

CRISIS IN AFGHANISTAN

The tumultuous events of the past few months have changed the shape of Afghan society and the future of its people – possibly for decades to come. But what does it mean for the tiny underground church which was already suffering persecution?

For many of us who watched TV during the recent takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, the future for the tiny Christian church looked bleak. Rumour and misinformation abounded – sometimes stories of persecution were even taken from other countries and superimposed on the Afghan situation as ‘fact’.

However, we know that even before

the resurgence of the terrorist group Christians were underground, there were no church buildings and believers were able to gather only in relatively small numbers.

The former authorities may not have been as vehemently anti-Christian as the Taliban, but believers faced persecution from their Muslim relatives for whom conversion was,

and remains, an act of betrayal of the family and their faith.

As the father of a family who had come to faith previously told our partner, Operation Angel, before the Taliban seized power: *‘I got beaten up by my uncle and brother who were angry about my new faith in Jesus. They are still bothering me, and my children who are afraid to go to school at the moment.’* Yet the family remains true: *‘I found the truth, and He (Jesus) found me.’*

In a recent conversation, the family sounded sad. *‘We don’t even have bread to eat. Thank you for listening to our heart cry and for standing with us in hard times.’* Now, however,



Christians from a Muslim background face increased pressure from both their families and the Taliban.

One woman told our partner: *'We in our family all follow Jesus. We had Christian books, and my father always had a Bible with him. We are all in hiding.'*

Another said: *'We are afraid; at night homes are being robbed, and people are being killed.'* When asked if it is worse than before, he said, *'No, it is less than before, but still, we hear of it every day.'*

Thankfully, up to the end of October 2021, there were just a handful of reports of Taliban systematically



Stock photo

Release International partners broadcast in Afghanistan using radio and TV.

searching for Christians, Christians being taken or being killed or young girls being abducted as 'brides'.

A number of believers have managed to escape the country; others are desperately trying to escape across the borders while most have had to stay. Many have changed locations at least for a while.

Christians who don't follow the outward forms of Islam such as praying at the mosque and saying the Shahadah (the Islamic profession of faith) stand out more clearly. So many now live with the fear of being discovered and facing the consequences – including even being martyred.

Christians, like the rest of the population, are also fearful of a potential humanitarian crisis as winter gets under way, widespread hunger unfolds due to a poor harvest and food shortages and the banking system remains paralysed along with a major breakdown in the economy.

The situation is only expected to deteriorate in 2022. Known Christians are likely to be discriminated against when it comes to work and the distribution of resources. They will also likely face pressures against giving their children, especially daughters, a well-rounded education and are likely to be more fearful for

the safety of women and young girls, particularly those not yet married.

Panayiotis Keenan, the executive director of our partner SAT-7 Pars, which broadcasts programmes via satellite TV into Afghanistan, told us recently: *'Since the Taliban has taken over, we are receiving many messages from Afghanistan that the persecution is getting harder.'*

'Afghan Christians are contacting us on a daily basis, describing how difficult the situation is. They are hiding and meeting in secret locations. But winter is coming and that will soon become more and more difficult.'

Pakistan and Iran are the natural escape routes for Afghans fleeing their country but the Pakistan border was closed after the Taliban takeover. At the time of writing the UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, reported, however, that Pakistan had started easing the movement of people and goods at the border with Afghanistan, offering some hope to those trying to leave Afghanistan – including Christians.

Although the Church in Afghanistan was never large and many Christians have had to escape the country, some draw a parallel with events in Iran where, under harsh persecution, the church has multiplied.

Continued overleaf...

HELPING OPPRESSED CHRISTIANS

Stock photo



A camp for displaced families near Kabul.

'We have a sovereign God and we know He has a plan,' said Panayiotis. 'To think about it, you would say there was no chance for the church in Afghanistan. But we have seen in the last 10 to 15 years how rapidly Christianity has grown in Iran. If that can happen there, why not in Afghanistan?'

Even before the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan was one of the most hostile countries to be a Christian. Release International CEO Paul Robinson said: *'The one good thing we can say about this is that the underground church is increasingly well-equipped to weather the storm. The church is invisible and has already learned how to operate in secret.'*

Release International has been partnering with a range of Christian organisations to provide broadcasts to encourage and equip believers in Afghanistan, including refugees who have now fled to neighbouring countries. These partners are also producing Christian literature and digital discipleship materials.

Despite oppression, the tiny church is growing. In the year 2000 there were just a few dozen believers; by 2021 there were understood to be several thousand, mostly from the younger generation.

And it is not just numbers that offers hope for the church – but the commitment of its members.

Operation Angel, which broadcasts the Christian message into Afghanistan, reported these

comments from one young man who contacted their ministry:

'Things will get better, and I will serve the Lord more than before. I had to move location after the place where I stayed was broken into, but I don't plan to leave Afghanistan. There are many people in the West to talk to about Jesus, but here there are few. I want to stay here and serve God.'

Some weeks later he said, *'Now, more than before, people are open to hear about Jesus. I have shared with six or seven people recently.'*

A Christian woman cried as she shared her story with our partner: *'Our families found out that I accepted Jesus, and they come every day putting pressure on me to turn back. I follow Jesus, but I don't even know how to pray!'*

Our partner reassured her and taught her the Lord's prayer. She said, *'For the last few days I've been asking God to show me if I am right or made a mistake. Now I know I chose the right way. God sent you to comfort me. Thank you.'* A week later she said, *'Thank you for praying for me last week. I had so much peace and joy all week.'*

The Afghan church may be facing its toughest challenge yet – but God continues to work in and through it. As our partner concluded: *'The pressure is increasing but so is the harvest. Jesus is right there building His church.'*

Afghan believers cry out to God

'I work as an assistant in an office. I never thought it would be so difficult to live in one of the big cities. Where I work, they force me to do the prayers. I did, but I was praying to Jesus and prayed, "God, You know my heart, so please forgive me."'

'The government is trying to help people here, but when I went to register, the leader of our area told me I could not get help because I do not come to the mosque. After my family found out that I am a follower of Jesus, they stopped communicating with me and my wife.'

'When my son was visiting us from Iran, he shared his faith with his cousin. This created a lot of problems, and so we sent our son back to Iran.'

'Please pray for me and my family. I became a believer a few years ago, and now I am afraid since my village and many others know I am a follower of Jesus.'

As told to our partner inside Afghanistan.

AFGHANISTAN



Population: 37.5 million

Capital: Kabul

Government type: Islamic republic

Religion: 99.7%; other (including Christian) 0.3%.

Sources: World Factbook.

Pre-Islam there were pockets of Orthodox Christianity in Afghanistan. Islamic conquests and Tamerlane invasions removed Christianity and for 600 years there was no church. In the mid-20th century a few development workers entered Afghanistan and their numbers grew in the 1960s. By the following decade there was a small number of Afghan believers. The Russian invasion in 1979 created an opportunity to reach Afghans displaced by the war, with many coming to faith. After the fall of the Taliban in 2001 believers could meet together more freely. There is no above-ground church – but there are some thriving groups of believers in the diaspora.

PARTNER PROJECTS

Your support enables these vital ministries to help oppressed Afghan believers:

Operation Angel produces and broadcasts radio and TV programmes into Afghanistan and connects through social media.

It also:

- runs telephone Bible classes, especially for isolated believers
- ministers to Afghan migrants and to Afghan believers outside Afghanistan through conferences and discipleship classes, including online during the Covid lockdowns

Our partner Operation Matthew produces, distributes and uses inspirational materials, including resources for seekers and believers often located in difficult and isolated situations. These include:

- radio programmes, podcasts and the follow-up of those who respond by phone and text or email
- audio and video materials, including music, Scripture portions, and segments from radio programmes and video dubbing
- materials in print and pdf format for seekers and believers

PRAY

- That our partners will know how to respond to the pain of people responding to their Christian media
- That all our partners' media will have a lasting impact and will encourage, strengthen and equip our brothers and sisters. Pray that seekers will come to know Christ for themselves
- That Christians in Afghanistan and in the diaspora will know the peace of God, whatever their situation



YOUR OPPORTUNITY TO HELP CHRISTIANS FACING OPPRESSION

In Afghanistan and around the world, frontline Christians face increasing pressure from both hostile governments and militant groups.

Your gift can bring encouragement, pastoral care and practical support to our precious brothers and sisters in Christ.

Please stand with our global family by making a gift today. Please use the enclosed form, call 01689 823491 or give online at releaseinternational.org



PERSECUTION TRENDS 2022

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



*Children displaced by conflict in Tigray in 2021.
Photo: Reuters/Baz Ratner.*

AFRICA



ERITREA/ETHIOPIA

In 2021 continuing civil war in Tigray, northern Ethiopia, forced thousands to flee, including hundreds of Eritrean Christians living in UN refugee camps near the border. The conflict has been marked by brutality and has caused food shortages and famine.

The government of Eritrea continues to persecute evangelical Christians, banning all meetings and arresting individuals at will.

'Christians have been the most

persecuted group of people in Eritrea. It is because they won't stop gathering and won't stop worshipping. It is beyond the government's control,' said our partner Dr Berhane Asmelash.

'In 2021 we have not seen any change in the government's policy,' he said. 'Yet Christianity has continued to grow.' An estimated 180 Christians remain in prison.

According to the UN, half a million Eritreans have left their country – more than ten per cent of the population. In 2022 it is anticipated that repression, forced military conscription and economic collapse will force many more to become refugees – including persecuted Christians.

NIGERIA

Attacks by Boko Haram terrorists and Fulani herdsman militia continued throughout 2021. By July over 3,400 Christians had been killed. *'Attacks by Fulani militias destroyed over 50 villages and displaced nearly 5,000 Christians,'* said our partner.

'The attacks by the Fulani now include kidnappings for ransom. Churches, church leaders and Christian communities remain the primary targets.

'2022 is a political campaign year and from past antecedents, attacks by Boko Haram and Fulani militants have increased at these periods. They see that the security agencies are unable to contain them,' said our partner.

BURKINA FASO

In 2021 jihadists targeted Christians in the north of the country, forcing churches to close their doors and meet in secret. The attacks ranged from bombings, killings, kidnappings and school burnings to assaults on places of worship and religious leaders.

According to the Global Terrorism Index, the faction responsible for most of the killings is Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. *'The situation facing Christians is now similar to Nigeria,'* said our partner. These pressures will continue in the coming year.

EASTERN ASIA



NORTH KOREA

The complete prohibition on Christian activities and identity continued in North Korea during 2021.

'Persecution remains constant because the existence of Christianity among North Koreans poses a direct threat to the claims of legitimacy and primacy by the state and particularly the Kim family,' said Dr Eric Foley, CEO of our associate ministry Voice of the Martyrs Korea.

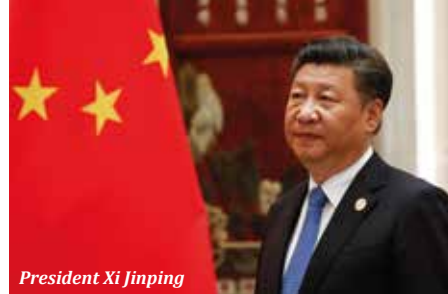
Christians who are discovered or exposed face the severest penalties, including imprisonment in labour and concentration camps, and execution.

'However, the church is growing faster than the church in the UK, the US and South Korea,' said Dr Foley. During 2021, despite the Covid-19 pandemic, requests from Christians for Bibles increased dramatically, since the authorities reduced their house-to-house searches to avoid infection.

'Let's pray not only that the gospel continues to spread, but also that the church outside of North Korea – in the UK, the US and South Korea – be encouraged and strengthened by the witness of North Korean underground Christians,' he said.

Unless there is a collapse in the regime, we anticipate that the extreme, systematic persecution of Christians in North Korea will continue in the coming year.

'Be encouraged and strengthened by the witness of North Korean underground Christians.'



President Xi Jinping

CHINA

During 2021, many unregistered churches have been unable to meet in larger groups, reports our partner. *'Since the major lockdowns due to Covid-19, resumption of meetings has not been possible. As a result most of these churches are meeting in small groups, usually in apartments.'*

The message that religion is bad for education and achieving progress in life is being promoted in schools and universities. *'Even junior grades have now had "Xi Jinping thought" added as part of the curriculum, which is anti-religion. A number of pastors have been arrested and church services closed or disrupted, even among registered churches.'*

Anything that does not promote the Chinese communist ideology is branded as 'un-Chinese' and efforts are made to remove it. Christianity obviously does not answer to the communist party, and so in their terms is unacceptable.

'Persecution is increasing, and spreading across the whole country,' said our partner – and will continue in 2022.



Military parade in Pyongyang, North Korea. Stock photo.

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2022



Desperate Afghans wait near Kabul airport in August 2021, hoping to escape before the Taliban takeover.

SOUTH ASIA



AFGHANISTAN

Last year was a tumultuous year with the Taliban taking over the country. *'Christians experienced fear of being reported by family members or neighbours, and fear of violent treatment by the Taliban,'* said our partner. *'We heard of some homes being searched and of some individuals receiving threats.'*

For Afghan Christians there have always been high levels of persecution, and this remains. The change for 2022 is the very real threat of increased widespread persecution and of higher levels of violent persecution.

'Christians who don't follow the outwards forms of Islam such as

praying at the mosque, and saying the Shahadah [the Islamic profession of faith], will stand out more clearly and this increases their vulnerability to persecution and pressures to conform,' said our partner.

A poor harvest and a major breakdown in the Afghan economy caused severe food shortages last year – and these are expected to get worse in the coming year. *'Lack of work and food is a major problem for everyone, and known Christians are likely to be discriminated against,'* said our partner. Read more about Afghanistan on page 6.

INDIA

Attacks against Christians are rising and more states are imposing anti-conversion laws. This comes as growing numbers of the Indian underclass, the Dalits, are turning to Christianity, and as right-wing Hindu nationalism is on the rise. Karnataka state, for example, is poised to impose anti-conversion legislation.

The Evangelical Fellowship of India recorded 145 incidents of religious persecution against Christians – including three murders – in the first six months of 2021. A coalition of NGOs, including the Association for Protection of Civil Rights, listed

more than 300 violent attacks against Christians over a nine-month period last year – including 288 incidents of mob violence across 21 states. Attacks against Christians are likely to continue in 2022.

PAKISTAN

False blasphemy accusations, abductions, forced conversions and marriages, physical violence, destruction of property, discrimination and even religiously motivated murder continue to affect religious minorities, including Christians, says our partner.

'In 2021 Covid-19 disturbed people mentally, physically, economically and spiritually. We have helped people by spending time with them in prayer, and by providing practical support.'

Christians are likely to continue to face oppression and discrimination at work, at school and college, in accessing services and resources, and in the legal system.

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.

'Christians individually are not being persecuted, but as a whole anyone who believes in anything else but Islam

has problems in running a business or applying for loans, for example,' said one of our partners.

'Churches face more and more restrictions and during the pandemic period were not allowed to operate, unlike the mosques which have been operating all the time.'

Over the years, government policies have systematically discriminated against non-Muslims, in particular Christians, said another partner. Such discrimination is likely to continue this year.

CENTRAL ASIA

'In general, at the central and local levels, there are restrictions and discriminatory bureaucratic procedures that prevent churches from obtaining permits – especially targeting pentecostal or charismatic groups, which are the fastest-growing churches in the region,' reports our partner.

However, during the past year the intensity of persecution has decreased. *'This is not because the authorities in these countries have become better at treating Christians, but because the authorities face many other problems during the Covid-19 pandemic, such as the poor state of medical institutions and the lack of medicines.'*

Our partner notes that in Uzbekistan, *'there is a noticeable improvement in the area of state-church relations'.* However, in 2022 Christians throughout Central Asia will continue to face restrictions. Read more about Central Asia on page 14.



MIDDLE EAST



EGYPT

Despite protection provided by the constitution, Christians will continue to suffer oppression and persecution during 2022. Most live as second-class citizens, experiencing discrimination in law, education and employment.

'Christians are a minority who face direct and indirect persecution in their daily lives,' said our partner. *'In previous years, Christians have been subjected to violence, such as church bombings and attacks on buses carrying Christian pilgrims. We are thankful that in the past year there were no major incidents such as these.'*

Christians in Upper Egypt face the harshest persecution. *'Christians may be overlooked for jobs or promotion, their children are made to sit at the back of the class, shop owners may be boycotted and hospital patients may not receive proper treatment,'* said our partner. *'In some cases Christians are forced to leave their houses and possessions, and Christian girls and women have been kidnapped and forced to embrace Islam.'*

IRAQ

'We provide support to refugees and internally displaced people from Iraq and Syria who have fled their homes and now live in poverty. Many have lost family members and cannot provide for their children,' said Release International partner Jamal.



'Children, adults, the elderly – all refugees deserve the right to be treated as valued human beings. While Covid-19 has limited our movement, it has not stopped us from getting supplies to the needy.' Continuing instability will ensure that Christian refugees will need support in the coming year.

IRAN

'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,' reports our partner. *'In fact their overall goal is to exterminate the Persian-speaking church and only to allow Christian minority groups to operate. Longer prison sentences are being given by the courts to some Christian workers.'*

There is no doubt that the government is concerned that disillusioned Muslims are becoming Christians. *'Publicity on the internet or in the Christian press about the growth of the church has alerted the government to what is happening,'* said our partner.

Converts and Christian workers and leaders are likely to face increasing pressures in 2022. *'The very fear of persecution is a worry as believers meeting in their house groups do not know if they are under surveillance or not.'*



Standing strong IN CENTRAL ASIA

Despite continuing restrictions and the pressures of the Covid-19 pandemic, your gifts and prayers are helping Christians in Central Asia to remain strong in their faith, writes our partner 'Pavel'.

Throughout Central Asia there is freedom of religion – but only in theory. The situation on the ground in each country (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) is totally different, because of the varying religious contexts.

In general, at the central and local levels, there are restrictions and discriminatory bureaucratic procedures that prevent churches from obtaining permits – especially targeting pentecostal or charismatic groups, which are the fastest-growing churches in the region.

'We pray for a revival in the face of the pandemic, so that people will turn to God.'

There have been sporadic incidents of violence against churches and individuals by Islamic extremists. If such cases of violence reach law enforcement agencies, then real justice happens very rarely. Most often these incidents are viewed as separate criminal cases,

as hooliganism, and not as real violations of human rights.

Islamic leaders actively promote the point of view that all converts from Islam to Christianity are "traitors to the faith of their people". In addition, evangelical Christians are often associated with Western countries and are seen as American spies and agents of Western imperialism.

In the post-Soviet era, all Christians in Central Asia face these common restrictions:

- open preaching of the gospel (proselytism) is prohibited by law, limiting the right of believers to confess their faith, but not to spread it
- a ban on holding Christian meetings without state registration
- a ban on distributing Christian literature outside the church building of the registered community
- unrealistic regulations for the registration of churches. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, a church needs the signatures of 200 local Christians to register

- churches are required to provide comprehensive data about their members. Churches fear that these details are at risk from Islamist groups and criminals.
- parents are often not allowed by the authorities to take their children to church services (especially in Tajikistan)

Answers to prayer

Despite these continuing pressures, my wife and I, and our team of dedicated Christian workers, have seen a number of encouraging signs. For example, while the pandemic has caused many severe problems, it has actually reduced persecution – at least temporarily. The authorities of these countries are busy coping with many government issues, and so have less time and capacity to be engaged in persecution.

In addition we gladly report:

- it has become easier for Christians to live and work in Uzbekistan and for some churches there to be registered
- some of our co-workers from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan were able to come to see us – a real miracle from the Lord
- In Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan some Bible teaching sessions were held by local leaders, who are growing in strength and vision

One pastor in Turkmenistan wrote to me recently: *"The Lord is still working in our country. We pray for a revival in the face of the pandemic, so that people will turn to God and trust more in Him than in people. We hope that this disease will decline soon. We know that God has everything under control."*

We appreciate all your gifts and prayers very much indeed. May the Lord bless you richly and reward all of you abundantly in every possible way. 🙏

Our partner 'Pavel' (not his real name) leads a team of Christian workers who provide support, training and pastoral care to underground believers throughout the region.

Good News

Released - after ten years in jail on false charges!



Photo: Maryam Afrab, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Pakistani Christian Sajjad Masih Gill, who was incarcerated for nearly ten years on a false blasphemy conviction, has finally been freed from prison. He was acquitted by the Lahore High Court (pictured) in November due to insufficient evidence and was released quietly to avoid provoking militants, his lawyer said.

Gill had been convicted of sending a blasphemous text message and initially received a sentence of life imprisonment. However, in March 2021 this was changed to the death sentence. Pray for Gill as he reunites with his family and ask God for continuing protection.

Greater religious freedom in Uzbekistan



Stock photo

'There has been a noticeable improvement in the area of state-church relations in Uzbekistan,' reports our partner 'Pavel' (not his real name).

'During the past two years several evangelical churches have been officially registered. This includes some in the autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan, where there was no registered church and where Christians have been severely persecuted for their faith. Even where churches are not registered, the attitude of local authorities towards Christians has become more tolerant.'

Although there is still no freedom to share the gospel publicly, we thank God for this very encouraging news, and ask you to pray for an outpouring of God's Spirit in the country. Read more about Central Asia on page 14.

YOUR HELP IS NEEDED



If you're a keen cyclist (or would like to help one) please check out the details for Rev Robert de Berry's marathon sponsored bike ride – which aims to raise £250,000 through sponsorship for persecuted Christians. The ride from North Foreland Point Lighthouse, Kent, to Land's End, Cornwall (and back), takes place May 14-June 25. Robert is looking for stage riders, support drivers and those willing to offer accommodation en route. Find out more on page 19. Please pray for Robert and all those involved as the start date approaches.



Stock photo

Caring for families in Sri Lanka

Thanks to your giving, our partner NCEASL has been able to help persecuted pastors in Sri Lanka – providing an essential lifeline for them and their families during the relentless Covid-19 pandemic.

'While I was at home last year with my wife, a group of monks and a few villagers from the area arrived uninvited and told me to stop my church services as Sri Lanka is a Buddhist country,' said village pastor James.

When he reported the incident to the village police, they sided with his accusers. The next day James received an official letter ordering him to stop all Christian meetings.

However, after contacting our partner NCEASL (the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka), he received prompt legal advice and support to help him withstand the intimidation.

'I give my thanks to its legal department who guided and helped me when I was facing these issues,' he said. 'At this time I was also asked [by the authorities] to install CCTV cameras for my own safety – but these were quite

expensive and I didn't have the funds. As I was praying and asking God, NCEASL offered to cover the cost!

'Furthermore, during the Covid-19 pandemic when the church was closed, the organisation provided me and my family with food. I thank God for their support and the many ways they are helping Christians. I pray God's blessings upon NCEASL and all the good work it is doing.'

As the testimony of James shows, the coming of the pandemic has not reduced persecution – but rather is an additional burden for Christian families suffering oppression in Sri Lanka.

In the first six months of 2021, NCEASL recorded 47 cases of persecution against churches and individual believers. In particular, extremist Buddhists continue to pressurise churches to close – especially those in rural areas. They

argued that Sri Lanka is a Buddhist nation, and that to be a Sri Lankan is to be a Buddhist. Monks with these views continue to incite threats and intimidation against congregations, pastors and their families. As a result, the children of persecuted believers often suffer stress and trauma – and need help with their schooling.

Your support is helping dozens of Christian families to survive at this difficult time.

'Many of these children's parents are struggling to make ends meet,' said our partner. 'The money provided has ensured that their children will continue to get an education.'

Covid has become a major point of concern – not just in terms of the health of students – but in their psychological state too. Many suffer from being confined to their homes.

'Their education has taken a massive hit,' said our partner. 'As schools across the island have been closed, all education has moved to an online platform. Many of the students living outside the capital Colombo do not have access to such facilities, so families are struggling to cope.'

Because of the pandemic, NCEASL has been unable to hold its popular Kids Camp, which provide an opportunity each year for families to have a fun break and to receive pastoral care and encouragement. Also travel restrictions have severely limited the number of visits our partner can make to families in remote areas.

In response it has set up new children's educational and spiritual programmes online, using Zoom where possible to host virtual classrooms. In more remote areas, where communications are limited, families can access these resources using the WhatsApp messaging service, which is more widely available.

Kusum, for example, is a Christian teacher being supported by our partner to help families in these ways. Because communications are poor in her region, she cannot host virtual classes, but sends her notes to pupils by mobile phone. *'Since I cannot meet my students face to face I must also make many phone calls. However, the support shown by NCEASL has been a great encouragement and keeps me going.'*

SRI LANKA



Population: 23 million

Capital: Colombo

Government type: Presidential republic

Religion: Buddhist 70%, Hindu 13%, Muslim 10%, Christian 6%, Evangelical Christian 1%

Sources: World Factbook.

CHILDREN HELPED

Your support is changing lives



Stock photo

SHERONI

Sheroni's father started a church in 2008 in a rural area. As a young pastor and father, he faced many financial struggles as well as persecution. Over the years, however, the family managed to come to a better position. Our partner NCEASL helped them to start a small business – and this boosted their income.

Sheroni has finished her A-levels and hopes to pursue a career in law. Although she applied to many universities, intakes have been delayed because of the pandemic. However, with help from NCEASL, she is doing an online course in IT and English which the university recommended. Sheroni and her family are extremely grateful for this support at this difficult time.

NEHIEL

Nehiel's father, a pastor, has also struggled during the pandemic. His income from tithes has been reduced while prices have risen, including internet access which his son Nehiel needs for his studies. They are thankful

that God has provided for them through the support of our partner. Nehiel hopes one day to become a doctor and serve his village. The family prays that God will bless NCEASL and that all the work done will bear much fruit.

JENIKA

Andrew is pastoring a new church. The congregation is building a meeting place, so finances are stretched and he is struggling to pay for his daughter Jenika's education. Jenika is a girl who loves the outdoors and art. She is very creative. She loves butterflies, their colours, the way they fly and their beauty. She also loves playing outdoor sports and getting involved in active games.

Your support has helped to ease the family's financial burden to educate their daughter. They would not have known what to do if our partner had not come to their aid. Jenika says that in the future she wants to serve God through medicine. The scholarship provided has helped her on this journey.

Names have been changed.

IF PRISON WALLS COULD SPEAK

National drama tour

Based on the book *Imprisoned With ISIS*, this one-man multimedia performance tells the true story of Release International associate Petr Jasek, who in 2015 was imprisoned for his work aiding the persecuted church in Sudan.

'Extremely powerful – well worth seeing'

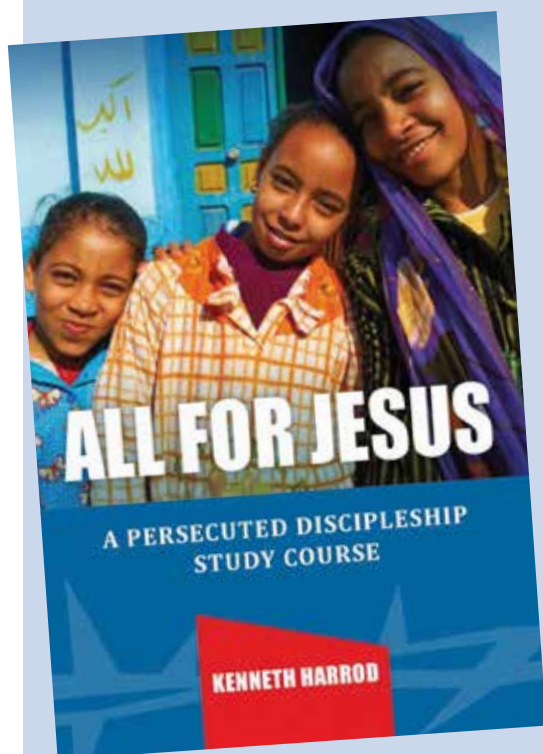
'An inspiration to others'

To find a performance in your region: see releaseinternational.org/artless.

To book a performance at your church: see artless.org.uk/prisonwalls.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
Voice
of Persecuted Christians

**Artless
Theatre Co.**



Lent course online

NEW

Five sessions every Wednesday in March at 7.30pm

**RELEASE
ONLINE**

This spring Release International is hosting a new online Lent series based on our popular Bible study booklet *All for Jesus*, which explores Christian discipleship in the context

of persecution. This is a great way for you and your church to use this resource as a live online course.

The sessions run from Wednesday, March 2, until Wednesday, March 30, starting at 7.30 pm. Don't miss out!

Register now at: <https://all4jesus.eventbrite.co.uk>

The *All for Jesus* booklets used in the course are priced at £4 each – or just £9 for a pack of ten. Order at releaseinternational.org/shop or call 01689 823491.

Team Robert and associates need your help to complete their marathon sponsored bike ride for persecuted Christians in May-June 2022.

Robert's amazing Bike Pilgrimage!

From May 14 to June 25, dynamic retired vicar Rev Robert de Berry and accompanying cyclists will ride from North Foreland Point Lighthouse, Kent, to Land's End, Cornwall – and back.

En route, Robert will speak in local churches to raise awareness and encourage prayer for persecuted Christians – and aims to raise £250,000 through sponsorship. The money will be divided equally



between Release International and CSW.

'Our intention is to be pilgrims – people on a journey of prayer. Tragically, the persecution of Christians in many countries is escalating,' said Robert.

'I invite you to do what you can to help us get support and encouragement to persecuted Christians.'



PLEASE HELP

We need supporters willing to help Robert achieve his spectacular goal. You could:

- Join the bike pilgrimage for just a day or more
- Offer to be a support driver, taking riders' luggage from point to point
- Offer an evening meal or B&B to one of the riders when they visit your town

If you'd like to take part, please register your interest at releaseinternational.org/bikepilgrims.

Robert's route



Robert & team will speak at the following churches (latest details at releaseinternational.org/bikepilgrims)

MAY 14 North Foreland Point Lighthouse **14** Canterbury **16** Maidstone Baptist Church ME15 6LU **17** Orpington Christ Church BR6 9EP **18** Sevenoaks St Nicholas Church SG1 4DA; **Tunbridge Wells** St Peter's Church TN2 4UX **19** Redhill Baptist Church RH1 6AE; **Cheam** Baptist Church SM3 8QB **20** Dorking St Paul's Church RH4 2HT **22** Godalming St John the Baptist, Wonerish GU5 0PG; **Cranleigh** Baptist Church GU6 8RT **23** Winchester Christ Church SO23 9SR **24** Salisbury St Paul's Church SP2 7QW **25** Sherborne Reborne Community Church DT9 5EW **26** Taunton Baptist Church TA1 3DH **27** Barnstaple Holy Trinity Church EX32 9HQ **28** Bude Oceans Community Church EX23 8AR **30** Newquay New Wave Church TR6 0HG **31** Crowlas Methodist Church TR20 8EA **JUNE 5** Penzance Team Ministry **6** Truro Methodist Church TR1 1EP (day conference) & Truro Cathedral TR1 2AF (evening prayer meeting) **7** St Austell Holy Trinity Church PL25 4FZ **8** Plymouth St Matthias Church PL4 8HF; **Wembury** St Werburgh's Church PL9 0HN **9** Exeter St Mark's Church EX4 7HU **10** Seaton Crossroads Church EX12 2ES; **Axminster** Weycroft Hall EX13 7LL **11** Dorchester Community Church DT1 1EF **13** Bournemouth Lansdowne Baptist Church BH8 0HH **14** Southampton Christ Church; Lighthouse International Church SO14 0BB **15** Portsdown Christ Church PO7 5AT **16** Southbourne St John's Church PO10 8LB **17** Worthing Findon Valley Free Church BN14 0DG Worthing **19** Brighton Downs Baptist Church, Woodingdean BN2 6BB; **Peacehaven** Church of Ascension BN10 8HR **20** Eastbourne Holy Trinity Church BN21 3BX **21** Hastings St Helen's Church, Ore TN34 2LR; **Bexhill on Sea** House of Prayer TN40 2JA **22** Ashford venue tba; **New Romney** St Nicholas Church TN28 8AS **23** Folkestone St John's Church CT19 5BQ **24** Margate St Philip's Church CT9 3EZ **25** North Foreland Point Lighthouse.

Asif's speaking tour of UK churches

February 18-28, 2022

Nearly two years since our last **In Person** speaker tour, we are very excited to introduce Release International partner Asif in church venues throughout the UK in February.

Asif runs a specialised ministry called Operation Philip which, in certain specific circumstances, helps to relocate Christians whose lives are in immediate danger due to persecution.



The aim of the project is to preserve the living witness of these believers in a new context much like the early Christians in Acts 8 who were scattered from Jerusalem but, in the process, carried the gospel to new places.

Operation Philip also invests in discipling these brothers and sisters and helping them integrate with other local Christians as they adjust to life in a new situation.

These **In Person** events are a unique opportunity to hear first-hand about this pioneering Kingdom work, to meet together with other like-minded Christians in your area, and to put your own questions to Asif.

Venue details will be confirmed very soon in the regions below. At the end of the live tour we will host a special **online event** on Monday, February 28.

Fri Feb 18 – Sun 20
London & South

Mon Feb 21 – Tues 22
Wales & Midlands

Wed Feb 23 – Thur 24
Scotland

Sat Feb 26 – Sun 27
Northern Ireland

Mon Feb 28
Online event

Check the latest information at releaseinternational.org/events.



**Please serve our
persecuted family!**

Our family around the world are being persecuted for following Jesus. Our team of volunteers play a key role in raising awareness in their own churches, and you can help do this too. Get in touch by emailing volunteer@releaseinternational.org or call our Volunteer Co-ordinator Andrew Wilmshurst on 01689 823491 to find out more.

'Everyone needs to hear this story'

If Prison Walls Could Speak UK drama tour 2022

These are just some of the comments we've received from the first performances of the Prison Walls tour by Artless Theatre Company in support of persecuted Christians:

'It brought to life how hard some people have to suffer for Christ'

'Emotional to watch and eye-opening... really quite inspiring'

'This needs to be performed in every single church in the UK'

If Prison Walls Could Speak is a powerful story of faith under fire. It is based on the true story of Release International associate Petr Jasek who in 2015 was imprisoned for his work supporting persecuted Christians in Sudan. Forced into horrifying prison conditions, Petr faces torturers, ISIS fighters and corrupt judges on his path to freedom, trusting that only God has the keys to his cell.

'Drawing from the testimonies of persecuted Christians around the world, this production sheds light on the wider struggles of the underground church and serves as a rallying cry for prayer and intercession,' said Artless Theatre Company Director Jon Maltz.

'It is a dramatic and compelling



testimony of God's faithfulness and the unstoppable nature of His Kingdom.'

If your church would like to host this exciting multimedia one-man performance, you can find full details at artless.org.uk/prisonwalls. For a list of forthcoming performances, check out: releaseinternational.org/artless.

Age range: advised for 11+ due to indirect depiction of torture and themes that may be disturbing to younger children.

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: James on 07434 894016

Scotland: James on 07434 894016

Wales & West of England: Paul on 07861 651139



THE WORD

**God cares for the oppressed
– and wants us to care too.
By Release International's
Jack Norman.**

Where does our comfort come from?

Why is it that the oppressors always seem to have the upper hand?

That's a question which seems to be on the author's mind in Ecclesiastes chapter 4: 'Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed – and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors – and they have no comforter.'

The oppressors have all the power, and there is no one to comfort the oppressed.

Today we could conclude the same as we observe those oppressing God's people seemingly having the upper hand. Consider oppressive states such as China, North Korea or Eritrea. Consider how Christians are being slaughtered and driven out of northern Nigeria, the government seemingly impotent to deal effectively with terrorists.

***'A day will come when
"God will bring every
deed into judgement"'***

Again, why is it that the oppressors often seem to have the upper hand?

We have to wait until the end of the book to find an answer, that a day will come when 'God will bring every deed into judgement, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil' (Ecclesiastes 12:14).

I remember meeting Samuel in Nigeria. Eight members of his family had been killed the day before we met, yet he seemed to understand

what the writer of Ecclesiastes said. When asked how he felt about those who had done this, the oppressors, he said, '*It is not for me to take revenge, they are in God's hands.*'

'God is "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort"'

As hard as it was, he was willing to trust God who says that the oppressors will not always have the upper hand.

But what about the other observation by the writer, that the oppressed 'have no comforter'.

We can look more widely at scripture and see that God is 'the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles' (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

But the writer of Ecclesiastes understands that we also have a role in bringing comfort to those who are oppressed. He writes in chapter 4: 'Two are better than one.... if either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up' (verses 9-10).

God is truly the comforter of those who are oppressed – but we are also called to play our part, to 'help them up'. We mustn't stand by feeling helpless: our job is to remember 'those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering' (Hebrews 13:3), to 'strengthen and encourage' them so they will not be 'unsettled by these trials' (1 Thessalonians 3:2), and when they are oppressed, to comfort them.

May God help us to do this.

INSPIRING FAITH



***'We cannot understand
God's ways, but we
know from His Word
that He is prompted by
love. Love frees us from
sin. Love always frees.'***

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.



THE DAY OF THE CHRISTIAN MARTYR

Wednesday, June 29, 2022

You and your church are invited to join us in remembering modern-day Christian martyrs on June 29, 2022.

A FREE resource pack will be available to help you and your church to take part.



01689 823491



releaseinternational.org/martyrs



martyrsday@releaseinternational.org

**Can you help persecuted
Christians in flight like
Fatemah and her family?**



RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

Voice
of Persecuted Christians

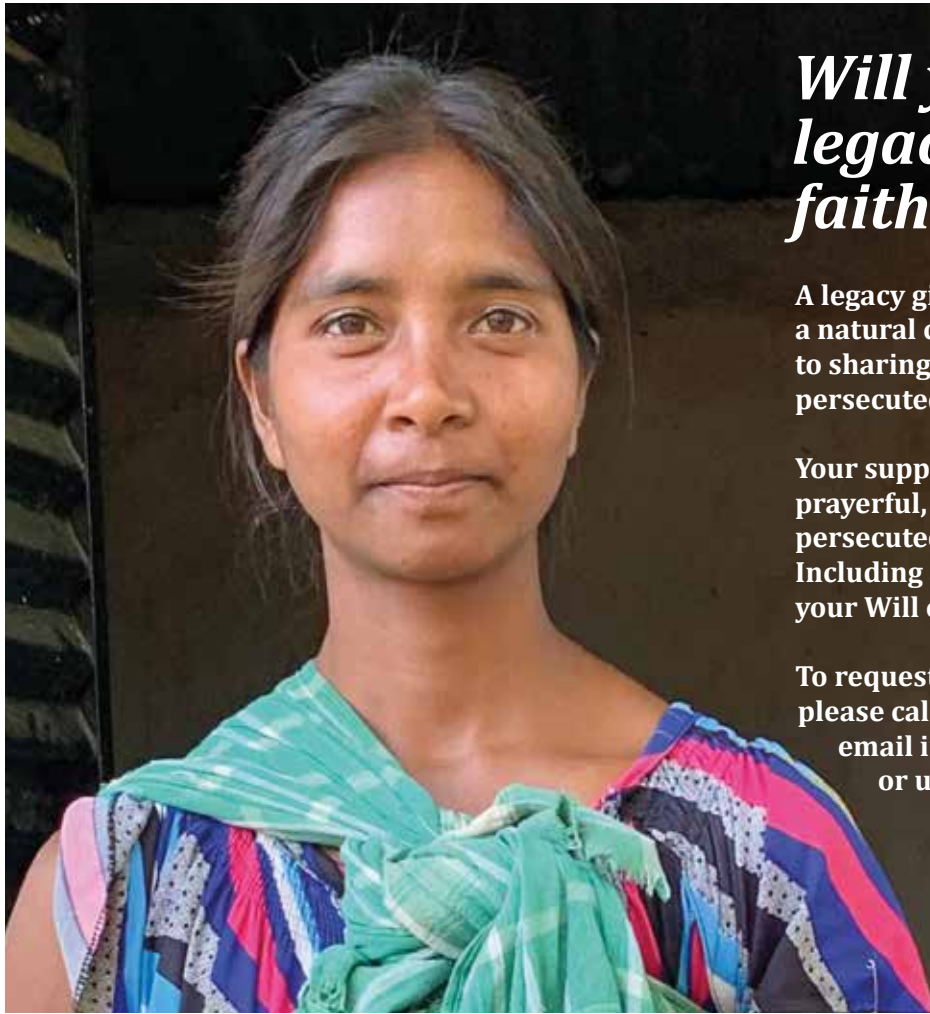
www.releaseinternational.org/Fatemah

info@releaseinternational.org

01689 823491

PO Box 54,
ORPINGTON BR5 4RT

CC 280577 (SC 040456)



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@releaseinternational.org or use the enclosed response card.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
Voice
of Persecuted Christians

ALL OUT FOR GOD

Sunday, May 29, 2022

Stand in solidarity
with persecuted
Christians worldwide

#AllOut4God

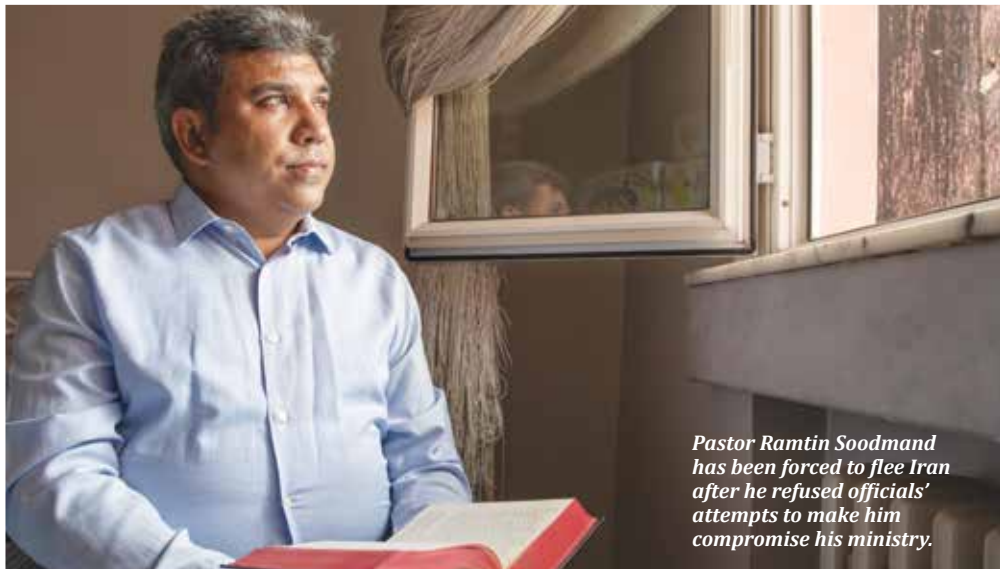
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all-out-for-god](https://www.releaseinternational.org/all-out-for-god)



prayershield

January – March 2022



Pastor Ramtin Soodmand has been forced to flee Iran after he refused officials' attempts to make him compromise his ministry.

JANUARY 2022

*Eternal God,
In You, I find peace that
surpasses all understanding
(Philippians 4:6). Thank You,
Lord.*

*Father, I pray that my
persecuted family too will
know Your peace that tran-
scends every circumstance.
Help them to fix their eyes on
You and to know that You are
God and You are good.*

*Help them to stand against
fear and anything that might
distract their focus from You,
the author and perfecter of
our faith.*

*In Jesus' name,
Amen*

IRAN

SATURDAY 1: At the start of a new year, let's stand with our brothers and sisters in Iran – and around the world – and pray that God will bless them with favour and fruitfulness.

SUNDAY 2: Pray for Pastor Ramtin Soodmand (pictured) and his family. They were forced to leave Iran last year – after officials pressured him to front a state-controlled church. His father, Hossein, was executed for apostasy, when Ramtin was still a teenager.

MONDAY 3: Pray that God will be with Sasan Khosravi and Habib Heydari. They were recently told to report to Bushehr Prison to complete

one-year sentences. They were released from jail in February 2021 on furlough.

TUESDAY 4: Give thanks for Release partner SAT-7 which recently celebrated 25 years of serving the Middle East and North Africa. Pray that its four satellite-TV channels will impact many more lives this year.

WEDNESDAY 5: Continue to pray for Ebrahim Firouzi who has been in jail or exile for most of the time since his first

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians

arrest in 2011. While in exile last year, he was detained on new charges, then released on bail.

THURSDAY 6: Behnam Akhlaghi and Babak Hosseinzadeh from Rasht are serving five-year jail sentences in Tehran, for being part of a house church. Pray that the Government will respond positively to the men's recent appeal for freedom of worship when they are released.

FRIDAY 7: Please pray that Iran's leaders will recognise that the Christian community are a force for good.

UGANDA

SATURDAY 8: Pray for Peace (pictured) whose family threw her out when she became a Christian at the age of 12. Thank God that her pastor's family took her in and that she has since been reconciled with her Muslim father.

SUNDAY 9: Relatives beat Mustafa Obbo when he returned to Tororo district to visit his mother. A former sheikh, Mustafa had not been back since he became a Christian in 2018. Thank God that, just as his attackers were about to douse him in petrol, a vehicle approached, so they fled.

MONDAY 10: Jafalan Mudoowa and her young son were locked in a room and starved for two weeks in Butebo district, when her husband discovered she had become a Christian. Thank God they were able to escape.



Peace has been reconciled with her family in Uganda: they rejected her when she became a Christian.

TUESDAY 11: Pray for the wife and three children of Pastor Barnabas Musana: he was killed by people who objected to his evangelistic events and debates about Christianity and Islam.

WEDNESDAY 12: While fishing with friends on Lake Lemwa, teenager Dante Tambika was beaten and strangled by extremists – for refusing to deny Christ. Pray for his family and surviving friends.

THURSDAY 13: Dante (above) had angered local extremists for leading several teenagers to Christ. His late father, Boaz, had been well known locally as an evangelist. Pray that many more will come to Christ through the ministries they set up.

FRIDAY 14: One of the teenagers who murdered Dante (above) reportedly told Dante his own brother had turned to Christ because of Boaz's ministry. Pray that this young man will repent and come to know Jesus' love and forgiveness.

SATURDAY 15: Extremists are suspected of the brutal

murder of Alex Mukasa, a church elder in Luuka district, who had led Muslims to Christ. Pray for his community who are said to be in shock.

SUNDAY 16: Harriet Namuganza, aged 83, was hospitalised after Islamist extremists attacked her in Iganga district, for giving refuge to two Christian young men who had converted from Islam.

MONDAY 17: Pray for the two young men (above) to whom Harriet had given sanctuary. They have since had to relocate because their relatives are reportedly hunting them down to punish them for leaving Islam.

TUESDAY 18: Pray that those responsible for the persecution of Christians in eastern Uganda would turn from their violence and experience God's forgiveness and new life in Christ.

VIETNAM

WEDNESDAY 19: Pray for Rev Vo Xuan Loan and her husband, Rev Phuong Van Tan, of Ho

Chi Minh City. The couple and 11 other believers have been questioned as part of a criminal case against Revival Ekklesia Mission (REM) Church for its alleged part in a Covid outbreak.

THURSDAY 20: Pray that God will work against officials' attempts to defame evangelicals in their hounding of REM Church (above).

FRIDAY 21: Pray for a Christian family from northern Vietnam who have been forced to give their community 100kg of pork to 'appease the gods' and stop villagers persecuting them.

SATURDAY 22: Pray that Christians in Vietnam will be like Abraham 'who did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God' (Romans 4:20).

SUNDAY 23: Please pray that the witness of the church in Vietnam will cause many to seek God.

ERITREA

MONDAY 24: Pray for the estimated 160 believers thought to be behind bars in Eritrea. Pray that God will sustain them – and make a way for their release.

TUESDAY 25: Pray for the swift release of 15 Christians recently arrested in Asmara. All of them have previously been imprisoned for their faith, but had been released in the summer of 2020.

WEDNESDAY 26: Pray for two church elders, Girmay Araia and Samuel Gebreweldi, both

in their 70s and from the Full Gospel Church of Eritrea, who were arrested in July. They have both been imprisoned previously.

THURSDAY 27: 'Fatemah' and her husband 'Dawit' were both imprisoned for sharing their faith in Eritrea. When she was released, Fatemah fled Eritrea – with her husband still in prison. For their safety, she left her children with relatives. Praise God the family are soon to be reunited in a third country.

FRIDAY 28: Release contacts say that Eritrean soldiers engaged in the Tigray region of Ethiopia are targeting priests. Ask God to protect the Christians in the area: its displacement camps house many who have fled persecution in their homeland.

SATURDAY 29: Stand with Release partner Dr Berhane Asmelash in interceding for Christians in Eritrea and the Tigray region. 'Pray for grace, that they can receive with joy the suffering they are facing, because they're doing it for the sake of Christ,' he said.

SUNDAY 30: Pray for a change in government policy towards Christians in Eritrea that will prompt a prisoner amnesty and an end to arbitrary arrests.

MONDAY 31: Thank God for the courage and perseverance of His people in Eritrea. Pray for even greater unity across the church in Eritrea this year.

FEBRUARY 2022

CHINA

TUESDAY 1: Please pray for all those in China who see Christians as a threat to their nation. Pray that God will speak to hard hearts and reveal Himself to the persecutors.

WEDNESDAY 2: Pray for Pastor Li Juncai (pictured) who is serving a five-and-a-half-year sentence in Henan after being convicted of false charges including 'embezzlement'. His real crime was refusing to re-join the state-registered church. His church was demolished in 2019.

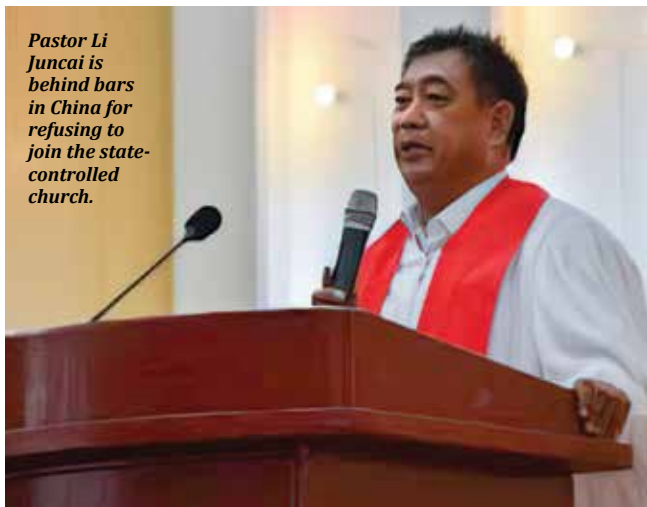
THURSDAY 3: Thank God for the release of 'Gospel Warrior' Chen Wensheng who spent 15 days in detention in Hunan province in September-October for public evangelism.

FRIDAY 4: Chen Wensheng (above) was detained six times in 2021. When police arrested him in September, to prevent him from going to church, he shared the gospel with them. Thank God for his boldness!

SATURDAY 5: The Chinese Communist Party is cracking down on Christian education – just as more and more Christian families opt to home-school their children. Pray that the party's attempts to control Christian education will fail.

SUNDAY 6: Five representatives of Abeka Academy in Suzhou, Jiangsu province, were arrested in October. Abeka is

Pastor Li Juncai is behind bars in China for refusing to join the state-controlled church.



a Christian home-schooling programme founded in the US. Pray for the release of Wang Jian, who remains in detention.

MONDAY 7: Pray for God's peace to fill a Christian school in Zhenjiang, Jiangsu province, which officials raided in October. More than ten children, three teachers and three parents were questioned and the adults detained overnight.

TUESDAY 8: In September, the Maizi Christian Music High School in Heilongjiang province was raided and the principal arrested. Pray its music will continue to make manifest the glory of the Lord.

WEDNESDAY 9: Continue to pray for high-profile Christian lawyer Gao Zhisheng who has not been seen for more than four years. Gao has suffered intense persecution since 2005.

THURSDAY 10: Ongoing persecution of Early Rain Covenant Church in Sichuan province has caused the congregation to split into smaller groups. Members of one such group, Tashui, have been arrested: one, Shu Qiong, has been beaten three times.

FRIDAY 11: Pray for Dai Zhichao and his family: he leads the Tashui group (above). The family have been detained, threatened and had their flat vandalised. Police rent the flat next door to monitor them closely.

SATURDAY 12: Pray for an elderly couple who belonged to Early Rain Covenant Church: police officers moved in with them in November to monitor their activity.

SUNDAY 13: Thank God that Jiang Rong, the wife of Pastor Wang Yi, leader of Early Rain Covenant Church, was recently able to visit him in prison for the first time in about three years.

MONDAY 14: Ask God to flood with His presence and His peace the prison cells of all those who are detained for His name's sake in China.

ALGERIA

TUESDAY 15: Pray for Pastor Rachid Seighir and Nouh Hamimi who plan to appeal against one-year suspended sentences for 'shaking the faith' of Muslims through their bookstore in Oran.

WEDNESDAY 16: Pray for Foudhil Bahloul, a Christian from a Muslim background, who is appealing against convictions on several charges including distributing Bibles and 'evangelistic activities'.

THURSDAY 17: An estimated 16 churches have been forcibly shut by the authorities in Algeria in recent years. Pray they will be able to reopen soon.

FRIDAY 18: Four churches in Algeria have been told to cease all activities, but have not been sealed. Pray they will find ways to worship that avoid official scrutiny.

SATURDAY 19: Pray for an end to Algeria's concerted campaign against Christians. Pray too that unjust laws hindering non-Muslim worship will be amended so churches can worship freely.

SUDAN

SUNDAY 20: Pray for Christians in Sudan following a military coup in October. Those behind the coup include a number loyal to the former

president, Omar al-Bashir, who imposed stricter *Sharia* (Islamic law) on Sudan.

MONDAY 21: Church leaders say there is real need for Arabic-language Bibles among the country's Christians. Officials recently detained a shipment of Bibles by demanding customs fees – even though by law it should be exempt. Pray that such hurdles are removed.

TUESDAY 22: Pray for the prompt return of several church buildings confiscated under al-Bashir's rule. These include a building of the Sudan Interior Church turned into offices for the former National Intelligence and Security Service.

WEDNESDAY 23: Some 9.6 million people in Sudan

are now food insecure, according to the World Food Programme. Pray God's provision for Christians who are likely to be at the back of the queue for state support, given their low social status.

THURSDAY 24: There are estimated to be about 1.8 million Christians in Sudan. Pray that the church in Sudan will grow in faith and number.

LAOS

FRIDAY 25: Thank God for the bold faith of teacher Duang Ma Nee (pictured). He was sent to teach in a remote rural village after his employers discovered he had become a Christian. Despite strong local opposition, he has planted a small church.

SATURDAY 26: Pray for believers in southern Laos where officials often demand that they renounce their Christian faith. Failure to do so can result in eviction or having their home demolished.

SUNDAY 27: Pray for five Lao Christian families whom officials evicted from their villages in Saravan province in 2020 and early 2021. They are living in makeshift huts, waiting for the new homes officials promised them.

MONDAY 28: The law permits Lao Christians to conduct services, preach and maintain contacts with believers overseas. Pray for believers in rural areas where these laws are not upheld and where Christians face discrimination.



Duang Ma Nee has planted a church in a remote area of Laos to which he was effectively exiled.

MARCH 2022

NIGERIA

TUESDAY 1: Thank God for hope rising from the ashes in Nigeria. Fulani militants killed Pastor Vincentor, husband of Dapma (pictured) in 2018 but she has been able to build a new home and set up a small business with support from Release associate ministries. She prays for the man who shot her husband

WEDNESDAY 2: Pray for two communities in Kaura county, Kaduna state, where Fulani militants killed more than 30 believers in one night in September. Villagers say all they have left is 'God and hope'.

THURSDAY 3: A Christian was killed and many others were injured in a Fulani attack on a worship service at the Evangelical Church Winning All in Gavaciwa, Kaduna. Ask God to comfort and heal His people there.

FRIDAY 4: Pray for the safe return of dozens of Christians kidnapped by Fulani militants during a raid on a Baptist church in Kakau Daji village, Kaduna, in October. Two church members were killed.

SATURDAY 5: Thank God for the powerful witness of an unnamed Baptist pastor in Lisuru Gida village, Kaduna, who was killed by Fulani in October when he refused to renounce his Christian faith.

SUNDAY 6: Ask God to provide for the family of Rev Yohanna



Release associate ministries have helped widowed Dapma set up a small business to support her family in Nigeria.

Shuaibu in Kano state. He was killed and his home destroyed by a mob angry at a murder they believed to have been committed by a recent convert to Christianity.

MONDAY 7: Rev Yohanna (above) played a key role in building a school for indigenous Hausa Christian children, transforming the prospects of youths who would otherwise have been denied an education because of their faith. Thank God for Yohanna's legacy.

TUESDAY 8: Please continue to pray for an end to the violence against Christians in northern and central Nigeria. Pray that the Government will take seriously its responsibility to protect all of its citizens and end the bloodshed.

WEDNESDAY 9: More than 50 people were killed by Fulani militants in Miango near Jos,

Plateau state. Many more were injured and more than 20,000 residents displaced. Please pray for this traumatised community.

THURSDAY 10: Thank God that our partners in Nigeria work tirelessly to support and sustain persecuted Christians, including those who survived the attack on Miango (above).

FRIDAY 11: Pray for the family of Habila Solomon, a pastor and medical doctor, whom Fulani militants killed at his home in Jauro Yinu village, Taraba state, recently. Pray that others will continue his work with the poorest in society.

SATURDAY 12: Pastor Habila (above) reportedly provided Fulani herdsmen and their families with free medical care. Pray that many will reflect on his strong witness to God's love, and renounce violence.

AFGHANISTAN

SUNDAY 13: Pray for Christians, including foreign workers, in Afghanistan where the return to power of the Taliban in August has prompted fears of renewed persecution.

MONDAY 14: Ask God to protect His people, especially Afghans who have converted to Christianity. Pray that they will be undetected and like Moses who 'persevered because he saw Him who is invisible' (Hebrews 11:27).

TUESDAY 15: Under *Sharia* (Islamic law), being exposed as a Christian puts people at risk of being charged with apostasy, which is punishable by death or imprisonment. Ask God to frustrate the efforts of those trying to identify Christians.

WEDNESDAY 16: The strength of the Taliban resurgence is likely to embolden extremists more widely: Christians in neighbouring Pakistan may now be at even greater risk. Ask God to protect His people across the region.

THURSDAY 17: Pray for Christians in Afghanistan, that though they are few in number, they will be strong in their faith, bold in their witness and fruitful in their ministries, for His glory.

FRIDAY 18: Pray for a young Afghan Christian woman, 'Esin', who fled to India in mid-August after receiving death threats

from neighbours. She could now be forced to return to Afghanistan because her visa has expired.

SATURDAY 19: Esin (above) and her mother and brother had only revealed to each other recently that they had become Christians – for fear of reprisals from relatives. Pray this family can be reunited: Esin's family have fled to a third country.

INDIA

'God has given me a vision for this area. I will not go anywhere else.'

Huldah, widow of murdered pastor Abraham, India

SUNDAY 20: Thank God for the overcoming faith of Huldah (pictured, overleaf) who still worships and serves in the church she planted with her husband, Abraham. He was murdered for his bold witness in 2018.

MONDAY 21: Continue to pray for India's Government, led by the Hindu-nationalist BJP. Its attitude towards non-Hindus has emboldened extremists in several parts of the country to persecute Christians.

TUESDAY 22: Pray for 15 Christian families in Adnathi, Madhya Pradesh. The village chief summoned believers – then ordered the Christians to abandon their faith or leave the village. A mob then pelted them with stones.

WEDNESDAY 23: Anti-Christian attacks in Madhya Pradesh are said to have increased since anti-conversion laws officially came into force in the state in March last year. Pray these laws will be overturned.

THURSDAY 24: Pray for Pastor Somu Avaradhi who was charged with 'outraging religious feelings' after Hindu militants who occupied his church in Hubbali city, Karnataka, accused him of forced conversion.

FRIDAY 25: Karnataka state officials are considering proposals to enact anti-conversion laws; some have even recommended withdrawing state benefits from those converting to Christianity. Pray that religious liberties will be upheld.

SATURDAY 26: A 200-strong mob raided a church in Roorkee, Uttarakhand state, beating Christians, and looting the building. A woman was taken to hospital in a critical condition. Pray for justice for Pastor Priyo Sadhna Porter and his congregation.

SUNDAY 27: Pray for seven pastors arrested during a prayer meeting in October in Mau district, Uttar Pradesh, then charged with 'illegal assembly'. Fifty other Christians were detained at the same time but freed.

MONDAY 28: Pray for justice for more than 60 Christians in Oteband village, Chhattisgarh



Huldah's husband, Abraham, was murdered by extremists but she continues to serve in the church they planted in India.

state. A mob assaulted and held them captive, accusing them of forcible conversion. Police detained the Christians, not their assailants.

TUESDAY 29: Pray for Pastor Raj Masih and his three children who have not been able to return to their home in Bihar state since Hindu extremists attacked him in late-September. Pastor Raj lost his wife to Covid in April.

Sources: China Aid; Christian Today; International Christian Concern; Middle East Concern; Morning Star News; Radio Free Asia; Release partners and contacts; VOM Canada; VOM USA; World Food Programme.

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.

WEDNESDAY 30: Thank God for the rapid growth of Pastor Raj's church (previous prayer) which has at least 300 members from different religious backgrounds. Pray that the congregation will grow, even in their pastor's absence.

THURSDAY 31: Pray for the family of Nitish Kumar, a teenager from Bihar who died in September after being attacked with acid.

His family believe the attack was linked to Nitish's faith: officials claim Nitish threw the acid on himself.

*Precious Jesus,
Lord of all, You see the end from the beginning. Jesus, please reassure my persecuted family of Your plan and purpose for them.*

May they know Your will 'through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives' (Colossians 1:9). May they know too that Your timing is perfect - and please sustain them in their suffering and in their waiting, Lord.

Amen

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