

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

JAN-MAR 2023

voice

of Persecuted Christians

**STANDING
WITH
OPPRESSED
BELIEVERS**

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



Welcome

by Paul Robinson, CEO

**How much
do I value
fellowship?**

**Fellowship. What does it mean to you?
Perhaps a chat over coffee at church after
a Sunday service? Maybe meeting together
with other Christians in small home groups?
How important is it to you?**

Reading the testimony of our dear sister Twen from Eritrea (see pages 6-10) and her declaration that finally being allowed to share a cell with other believers was like being set free from her imprisonment, I am inspired to think more deeply about my fellowship with others and what it would mean to me if it were taken away.

No wonder the Bible encourages us not to give up meeting together. Without fellowship we are solitary believers and more vulnerable. Of course there may well be times when we have no choice, either through health or other circumstances, but generally we should aim to be in fellowship with other believers. If you doubt that, then imagine being separated, like Twen, from other Christians for a lengthy period of time. What impact would that have on you? Do I, like Twen, value it? I guess we often know only when something is taken away just how important it is. But while we have the freedom to meet let's take full advantage of it.

TRENDS 2023

At the start of every year we publish a survey undertaken with partners detailing current persecution and the trends reflected therein.

In this year's report (pages 12-17) we have

included a number of prayers for our brothers and sisters in each of the specific countries highlighted. After reading each section please do take time to pray for our persecuted family. We may not see immediate results but we know that prayer changes situations.

That is why in every edition of *Voice* we provide three months of daily requests in the *Prayer Shield*.

Many of you prayed for Twen over the years of her imprisonment. Thank you so much for those prayers which helped to sustain her during the toughest of times. In fact she says: 'Your prayers saved me.' I know that she is grateful for all that intercession. So let us also continue to pray for other Christians around the world who are being oppressed today because of their faith and witness.

ARTLESS TOUR DATES

If you haven't had a chance yet to watch the Artless Theatre Company's powerful stage production of *If Prison Walls Could Speak* may I encourage you to attend a performance. New dates have been confirmed for England and Scotland for 2023 (see page 21). Petr Jasek, whose story of imprisonment in a brutal Sudanese prison the drama is based on, recounts how he was able to fall asleep peacefully every night despite having to share a cell with ISIS fighters. How was he able to do this? Simple. His church back home was praying for him at that precise hour!

CONTENTS

4

FAITH UNDER FIRE

News for your prayers



6

...EVEN UNTO DEATH

Twen's inspiring testimony



11

EMERGENCY SUPPORT

Sri Lankans assisted after attacks



12

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2023

Our key annual report



18

STANDING FIRM

Christians help in Burkina Faso



20

UP FOR THE BATTLE?

Prayer warriors needed



21

RUNNING TOTAL

Peter's marathon fundraiser

22

THE WORST OF TIMES?

Church can thrive under oppression

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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FUNDRAISING
REGULATOR

Faith under fire

Deacon martyred in Ukraine

Anatoliy Prokopchuk, a 52-year-old preacher and church deacon, has been found dead in Ukraine, having been arrested for his church work, according to Release International partners.

Anatoliy was arrested in November in Nova Kakhovka, a town that had been occupied by the Russian army for several months. His body was found outside the town four days later. There were signs he had been tortured.

A Release International partner said of his arrest: *'The accusations were severe and absurd: "Your church has no right to exist, as it's got connections with America and other western countries." The same accusations were used in the old Soviet Union and for this "crime" many thousands of evangelical Christians were put in prisons and concentration camps for many years.'*

Our partner asks for prayer for Anatoliy's widow, Irina, and their six children.

**Sign up to
Release**



Laos pastor 'tortured and killed'



The body of a pastor with an officially recognised church in Laos was found in October with signs that he was tortured and killed for his faith, area sources said.

Christian leaders and police in central Laos' Khammouane Province believe Pastor Seetoud (pictured), who went by a single name, was killed for spreading the gospel amid rapid church growth in the country, reports Morning Star News.

The pastor had been expected to meet with Christians in Thakhek, about 100 kilometres from his home, a journey of three and a half hours on his motorbike. When he failed to arrive more than three hours after the start time for the meeting, more than 20 people searched for him on the mountain pass near Don Keo village and at a local hospital, without success.

A local resident later found the pastor's body in a ditch off a mountainous jungle road near the village and uploaded photos of the scene to Facebook, enabling the search party to find his body.

Christian leaders said Pastor Seetoud's body was severely disfigured and showed signs of torture. The search party found his Bible near his body and his motorcycle nearby. He leaves behind a wife and eight children, the youngest a one-year-old.

Pastor Seetoud led a congregation of the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC), one of three officially recognised denominations in Laos.

Christian leaders said provincial police have told them Pastor Seetoud was most likely killed because of his faith. Police officials at the provincial level suspect local officials at the district level killed him, according to LEC leaders.

'No words can describe the pain that Seetoud's family and the local churches are experiencing,' a Laotian evangelical leader said.

Chinese prisoners released

Church minister An Yankui and co-worker Zhang Chenghao of Zion Reformed Church, who had been detained on suspicion of 'crossing the national border illegally' by Shanxi province's Fenyang Municipal Bureau of Public Security in November 2021, were released after serving their sentence, reported Release International partner ChinaAid.

Yao Congya, An Yankui's wife, disclosed that the two ministers could not return to their home and reunite with their wives due to the pandemic lockdown, so they went to their hometown first and waited there. An and Zhang were slimmer than before but seemed to be in high spirits. After going back to his hometown, the former communicated with his wife, son and daughter via video.

An Yankui, who wrote hymns and composed music during his imprisonment, had been sentenced to a year in prison and given a fine of 5,000 yuan (£580), while Zhang Chenghao received a similar sentence of a year and a fine of 4,000 yuan.

Listen to our latest podcasts



LIVING THE BEST LIFE IN LEBANON

Pastor Jihad is a partner of Release International, leading a church in the Lebanon which serves Christians who have suffered persecution. Here he shares his personal testimony – particularly how the Lord prepared him for his present role. Hear him speak of how we are all called to live the ‘best and most satisfying life’ for Christ now.

REMEMBERING TO PRAY ‘Pray for us,’ writes the Apostle Paul toward the end of his letter to the Colossians, ‘that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ – on account of which I am in prison.’ A few verses later in chapter 4, verse 18 Paul ends that letter with a simple, moving request: “Remember my chains”. When Christians suffer persecution for their faith in Christ we should be concerned; we should remember them. Hear from Release International CEO Paul Robinson on why it is important to remember and to pray.

DEPENDING ON GOD Susanna Koh, wife of Malaysian pastor Raymond Koh, who was abducted off the street in what was described at the time as a military-style operation more than five years ago, talks about her family’s struggle to find out what has happened to Raymond. Responsibility for his kidnapping, which was captured on CCTV, has been laid at the door of the Malaysian Special Branch. Raymond has not been seen since and his whereabouts continue to be unknown. Susanna describes the pressure she and her children have been under but also describes how her husband’s disappearance has motivated Christians in their service of Christ and the gospel.



Freedom for Iranian church leaders



Two Christians imprisoned in Iran for their church leadership roles were released a few days after a fire broke out at Tehran’s Evin prison (pictured) in October, but rights advocates were mystified about why they were freed.

Pastor Naser Navard Gol-Tapeh (pictured), who had spent two months in solitary confinement, was released from Evin on October 17 after receiving a pardon from Supreme Leader Ali Khamaneh, rights advocates said. The day after, Fariba Dalir, who had spent 38 days in solitary confinement after her arrest in July 2021 for starting a house church, was also released from Evin.

She also was pardoned, though by whose authority remained unclear. Both pardons were unexpected and had previously been denied, according to religious freedom advocates.

‘We know that various bodies, the UK Government and the UN, were advocating for [Pastor Gol-Tapeh’s] release, and we know that Evin Prison is hosting protesters and running out of space, but we don’t know what made Khamaneh do this out of the blue,’ said an expert on Iran for Middle East Concern (MEC).

Both had served more than a third of their sentences, and under Iranian law were eligible for early release.

Pastor Gol-Tapeh was arrested with three other Christians at an engagement party in Karaj, near Tehran, in June 2016. Dalir, a convert from Islam, was sentenced in November 2021 to five years in prison for ‘acting against national security by establishing and leading an evangelical Christian church’. Her sentence was later reduced to two years after the presiding judge realised he had made an administrative mistake in her case.

(Source: Morning Star News)

ERITREA

Following Jesus ... even unto death

Twen Theodros endured immense brutality during 16 years in Eritrean prisons yet has emerged victorious. Tom Hardie listens to her inspirational story – a testimony to God's grace and your prayers

Twen had been a Christian for only two of her 21 years when she was arrested and imprisoned. She was to spend the next 16 years locked away inside the Eritrean prison system, suffering intense persecution for her faith yet knowing the grace of God sustaining her through every trial.

'I was raised in Asmara [the Eritrean capital] and brought up a Catholic but I began to question some of what I was told and when I looked at my Christianity I saw that I was lukewarm. After reading the Book of Revelation, where it warns about being lukewarm, the fear of God entered my heart – I thought God might spit me out!'

Despite pressure from her family, which included taking away her Bible and gospel song tapes, Twen began to meet with other committed Christians for worship. However, her freedom to express her new-found faith did not last long. She was spotted leaving a meeting at a house and subsequently arrested. At that time in Eritrea – and even today – there are only four permitted religions: Sunni Islam, the Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholicism and the Lutheran Church

'In February 2004 I was in prison for one month for my faith. My father came and begged me, saying he would allow me to read my Bible and to have gospel songs, as long as I said "yes" to what the prison authorities asked in order to get released.

'I was so happy when my father came and said I could read my Bible and have freedom to go out but I asked the prison official what I was saying "yes" to. He said it was simply not to attend any meetings or to preach. I replied that the Bible said not to abandon meetings. He said I could still meet but just not attend huge conferences or gatherings. I said "what about

preaching?" to which he replied that I could share with small groups but not huge crowds, so I agreed. I did not go into the details so I signed and was released.

'At the time I had just finished military training so they gave me a letter to take to my unit. When I handed over the letter to the officer he said I had committed a crime and had signed saying I would go back to my former religion.

'Was I ready to forsake my family, my education, my job, all the things I loved the most?'

'I said that I had not said that but he gave me the letter. My heart was filled with sadness and I went home and knelt at my bedside and cried. I asked God for forgiveness.'

Twen then put her Bible in front of her and pictured in her mind the paper she had signed, putting them side by side.

'I said to myself: decide. The Bible or the letter? Was I ready to forsake my family, my education, my job, all the things I loved the most? And what about my life? I remembered that verse about forsaking everything for Christ and made a decision there and then.

'For eight months after that I was filled with joy and freedom and felt no fear.'

However, she was to face arrest again following a prayer vigil on New Year's Eve 2004.

Twen was taken to a prison at Mai Serwa near Asmara where she would spend nearly three years locked away in a shipping container. Among her fellow detainees was Helen Berhane, the gospel singer. The two became close friends and when Helen was released Twen described it as the hardest time for her. *'I was on my own in the container.*

'Many believers, mainly teenagers, came in and out of the prison, all renouncing their faith in order to get released. This even included pastors as well so the prison officers put pressure on me, saying "We will make you [renounce your faith] by force. If you do not comply you will die."

'I had one verse in my mind [Matthew 10: 32-33] and I was resolved to obey it: "Whoever acknowledges me before

Continued overleaf...



A shipping container like the one Twen shared with Helen Berhane



others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven."

During the daytime the prison guards would shut the door of the container and the window fully. *'I was not able to breathe. The guards waited outside for me to call them but I prayed, "please God help me!"*

'God gave me the word in 1 Peter 4:12-14: "Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you."

'When I received this verse, I felt the Holy Spirit in my heart. I started to rejoice and to breathe – I don't know how. It was like Daniel's friends alive in the fire. God wanted to show His glory in my life.'

There in the shipping container Twen says she learned the importance of Christian fellowship and says her suffering would not have felt so bad if she had had other believers with

her. To add even more pressure, she was separated from other Christian prisoners.

However, when they realised that she was determined not to renounce her faith they sent her to another prison in Wia, on the Red Sea coast, one of the hottest places in Eritrea.

Twen was placed in an underground cell but she says, *'I had a heart full of joy because I was with other Christians'*. In fact such was her delight at once more being able to share fellowship that she described meeting them as *'the day I was released! I remembered the meaning and the depth of Psalms 133:1-3'*.

Twen spent nearly two years in Wia, where conditions were brutal.

'They tried to scare us with warnings that unless we renounced our faith we would suffer this or that but our position was to be faithful even to death.'

It was not long before their resolve would be put to the test. The guards started the beatings in the hottest season. On one night they took Twen and others barefoot to an area with thorny ground, where they made them run across thorny ground. 'We

had to run after one of the guards while another pushed us from behind. Our feet became full of thorns. After a long time they made us lie down on the thorns and three men beat each woman. They were well trained in torture – they beat us in one place on our bodies again and again so we would not pass out and get relief on that part. They wanted maximum pain. After my beatings they made me sit down and said to me, "You are young, well educated, and you should get married and have children. We are giving you an opportunity to go because we love you and have pity for you".

'They were polite and tried to convince me. While in pain I answered one word: "God gave me life; to give Him my life is a small thing."

'When they knew I would not give in they reverted to cruelty; they hit me in the same place on my back. I could not tolerate the pain – it was beyond

'I prayed: "Forgive them for they not know what they're doing". I don't know how. So I finished that night in victory!'

what I could endure and I said to the Lord, "Don't test me beyond my ability to cope." but I then saw the suffering as a great privilege and felt the Holy Spirit's presence. I received grace to endure the pain and when I looked at the people who were beating me I realised I am suffering now but this will take me to glory; now they are laughing but their end is loss; they are in a worse situation than me. I started to love them and at that moment a verse from the scripture came to my heart and I prayed: "Forgive them for they not know what they're doing". I don't know how. So I finished that night in victory!'

It was not just the beatings that prisoners were made to suffer but also the effects of dehydration – they were given just one cup of water and one piece of bread a day. Thankfully Twen managed to survive.

Unsurprisingly she questioned why all this had happened to her while at

the same time also praying for help. *'I was so scared. I said I cannot do this on my own as I am overwhelmed with fear but God gave me a vision: a man, who looked like Jesus, was holding a girl child in his arms. The girl was happy and having fun but when I looked at the man he was in deep distress because he was protecting her from the beating. His mind was 100 per cent focused on protecting the little girl, then as they beat me I thought the stick is not falling on me but on Jesus, so I was able to endure the beating.'*

'Sometimes they made us roll on thorns as they beat us. I knew I could not do it alone but God enabled me. I had a wound on my thigh for many years afterwards. He was always with me in the suffering so even in that we are victorious.'

Because the guards believed that Twen was the leader of the group and convincing others not to renounce their faith they beat her even more harshly.

'They hit me everywhere on my body and when I reached the place that I could not tolerate it any more I fainted. But they would wake me up. They were trying to get me semi-conscious so I would sign their document. When I said I had nothing to say the beating would continue and I would lose consciousness again.'

'The third time this happened I saw my soul separated from my body, I heard angelic songs and fresh air on my face. I experienced joy I cannot explain. When I woke up it was the hardest thing as I was in a heavenly state and then surrounded by these men. I asked God: "Why did you bring me back? It's



Helen Berhane's inspiring testimony is available at releaseinternational.org



HOW TO PRAY FOR IMPRISONED CHRISTIANS

God never promised that we would not suffer in this world but, says Twen, 'Christian prisoners will be thinking: "How can all this suffering of ours be turned to the good?"' Pray that they can see an answer.

'I always pray that the same grace that sustained me will sustain them in their suffering; that they can rejoice. Our suffering in this world is very brief and passes quickly but God sees the eternal glory when he looks at us. He focuses on the eternal joy.'

better to be with you." But it was not possible, and I started to give up hope.'

Twen's condition was so bad that she had to be carried to her cell. The prison governor told her she would die unless she went to hospital but that she needed to renounce her faith before she could go. Twen refused.

'Another girl and I who had been beaten were taken back to the underground cell. I was in and out of consciousness. We were so in pain and tired that we slept side by side. While we were lying there I felt a sting on my foot in the dark; it was different to the usual bites of mice, and when the girl lit a match we saw that it was a snake!

'When the girl lit the match, we saw two more snakes of the same species but one was a big yellow cobra! The sister with me hit the snakes with a broom and managed to kill the smaller

one but the other was too big to kill so we prayed David's prayer when he faced Goliath: "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel."

'When we proclaimed this word our fear disappeared. One of the guards had heard the noise and came to see what was happening. The large cobra was next to me and about to strike – I was in so much pain that I could not move – but the guard just ran away and left us. "Ok, go but at least leave us your stick and flashlight!" pleaded my companion.

'As the snake was about to spit venom we proclaimed David's word and then the girl hit it on the head. It threw its whole body at us but I used the stick to fix it against the wall and we were able to kill it. God saved us. When the

Continued overleaf...



Twen was brought up in the capital Asmara. She would spend nearly three years in a prison not far from the city

guards came back in the morning they were surprised to see the dead snakes.

'Then I thought back about the bite on my foot and that it would be swelling but my whole body was already swelling. It was a miracle I survived; like Daniel not being eaten by the lions.'

Despite the swelling in her foot Twen was then forced to walk across hot sand; unable to lift her feet because of the swelling the sand would burn her feet.

'When the guard pushed me to run forwards the swelling burst. The pain was excruciating – the worst I had ever felt. I cried like a child. No one could comfort me.'

As well as having to deal with her own physical pain Twen had to watch as others suffered similar brutal

'The grace of God made everything possible. I feel so blessed to participate in Christ's suffering'

treatment. On one occasion twin sisters were beaten next to each other so not only did they suffer physically but also had to listen to the screams of their sibling. After two hours both of them lost consciousness. Twen held one of them in her arms as she died.

In total Twen spent 16 years in prison, finally being released as part of a government 'goodwill' amnesty for 200 prisoners of faith.

When she reflects on her time in prison and all the suffering she endured and witnessed, she has this message for Christians in the 'free' world: *'Your prayers saved me. This victory is a victory for all of us.'*

'The grace of God made everything possible. I feel so blessed to participate in Christ's suffering. Even now I do not have any grudge or hatred against those who put me in prison and tried to make my life miserable. I cannot think anything against them but love them.'

Key decision

'There's nothing good in prison,' Twen told me. 'Everything is painful: the food, the water, the lack of clothes. In the first few years when I was sick I was not allowed to see a doctor. Every day the guards speak to you using abusive words, they belittle you, mock you and try to break you. But in all of this the grace of God was with me.'

'What made the suffering easier was the fact that I was prepared. The day I decided to choose the Bible over the letter was the thing that sustained me in prison. It never came to my mind again whether I should renounce my faith or not as I had already made that decision.'

Tom Hardie

PLEASE HELP OPPRESSED CHRISTIANS

In Eritrea and around the world, Christians are under 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 make a gift today by using the enclosed form, calling 01689 823491 or giving online at releaseinternational.org



SRI LANKA



Buddhist prayer flags in Sri Lanka belie hostility towards Christians

Emergency help for injured Christians

Release International partners bring relief to a number of distressed believers

When Pastor Frederick Wilson heard two of his neighbours shouting outside his home he went to see what was happening. In the moments that followed he was hit with a shovel and the door and windows of his property were smashed.

Worse was to follow: when the pastor's son returned home at about 11.15pm he also was attacked. The young man was injured on his neck, hand and knees. His assailants also vandalised his cycle.

Pastor Frederick rushed his son to Anuradhapura General Hospital and then went to the police station to lodge a complaint.

Our partners were able to provide the family with emergency financial assistance to cover medical expenses in the days that followed as well as funds to repair their damaged home

and add closed-circuit TV cameras.

Pastor Frederick said that the support had been of immense significance to him and his family who were greatly distressed by the attack in August. He added that his church members had also been threatened and were not attending church, which had severely affected the weekly offering with the subsequent impact on his income.

Our partners hope to provide a nominal monthly allowance to help him and his family until church services are back to normal.

They have also been able to help a member of another church who has been unable to work as a result of injuries suffered during an attack by Buddhist villagers in October.

The pastor was away when a group of militants, angry that Christians were conducting services in their village,

PRAYING FOR SRI LANKAN CHRISTIANS

Please pray for God's protection over Christians especially in the island's remote areas.

Pray too for God's provision and care. Like the rest of the population, believers are suffering in the economic and political crisis that has engulfed the country since 2019, with prices of essential commodities soaring, the rupee collapsing in value and inflation topping 50 per cent.

Finally, ask God to grant wisdom to Release International partners as they support persecuted believers.



Pastor Frederick's son was attacked when he returned home

attacked the church during a Sunday service.

The injured believer was taken to a nearby local hospital and then transferred to Mullaitivu general hospital shortly afterwards.

Funds provided by our partners will help to cover daily needs and transport costs to the hospital until he is able to work again.

They hope to support the church with any preventive measures that are needed, such as CCTV or a protective fence.

PERSECUTION TRENDS 2023

From Nigeria to North Korea, from Egypt to Afghanistan key partners report on the pressures Christians are likely to face this year

Nigerians protest against the violence perpetrated by extremist groups



AFRICA



NIGERIA

'Nigeria, from every indication, is at a pivotal point in its history,' said our partner. 'The election in 2023 will determine whether the nation grows as an entity or continues to disintegrate.'

Such is their growing confidence in winning that northern Islamic political groups and fundamentalists have fielded both presidential and vice-presidential candidates.

If successful they may then 'push for an

Islamic state as has been championed by radical groups such as Boko Haram, Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA), Ansaru and militias devastating Christian communities in central Nigeria.'

The call by southern regional ethnic groups for cessation is yet another growing development.

Overshadowing these challenges are the persistent attacks against predominantly Christian communities in the Middle Belt region. In 2022 alone it was reported that more than 6,000 Christians were killed and around 17 villages destroyed by Fulani militias. There are currently more than two million internally displaced people.

'Kidnapping for ransom has now become the major money earner for the terrorist groups while victims of rape and people living with disabilities due to the attacks continue to grow among the Christian communities. Hundreds of thousands of children in these Christian villages are either unable to go to school or cannot access any good education,' said our partner.



Boko Haram is one of the militant forces pushing for Nigeria to become an Islamic state

He added that the elections in February and March (for president, governorships and membership of the assembly and senate) may well determine whether the agitating groups support nationhood or pursue independence either peacefully or violently.

Even if the Labour Party presidential candidate, who is a Christian, wins he may not be able to govern effectively because of the grip the northern political elite have on the country.

'The call to restructure the Nigerian constitution becomes the key factor for the nation. Unless Nigeria is structured and the constitution rewritten to give every region its autonomy and identity, minority tribes, who are

*predominantly Christian, will continue to be persecuted and to live as slaves and second-class citizens to the north with an agenda to make the nation an Islamic state. **Whichever way this goes, Nigeria is a nation in need of prayers and a miracle.***

PRAY

- For peaceful elections in 2023 and political developments that would help to bring an end to the violence against Christians.
- For protection for Christian communities across Nigeria.

ERITREA

The Eritrean Government continued to arrest Christians throughout 2022. Among those detained in the summer were a group of 17 men and women and eight children. This followed a number of detentions in the capital Asmara at the end of May as well as the jailing in March of 29 Christians who had attended a prayer meeting raided by the police.

Release International partner Dr Berhane Asmelash believes that, unless there is a genuine change in government policy, these arrests and detentions will continue in 2023.



Berhane Asmelash

Evangelical church leaders continue to be a target for arrest

and persecution because they are authority figures in society and therefore perceived as a threat by the state. The number of believers currently in prison is estimated to be about 250.

PRAY

- For all the Christians currently detained, often in harsh conditions. Some have been behind bars for more than a decade. Pray that more would be released in 2023.
- For an end to the targeting and arrest of evangelical believers especially pastors and church leaders as part of wider religious freedom reform.

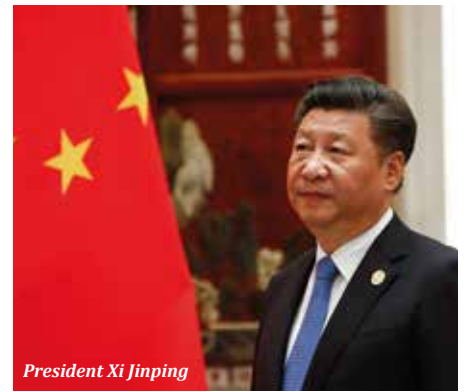
EASTERN ASIA



CHINA

Unregistered churches have been prevented from meeting as groups, so congregations get together in small numbers in apartments. There are many reports of leaders and members of unregistered churches being taken in for questioning and an increasing number have faced charges related to cults, to being corrupt with money and illegal religious activity. Many young people, teachers and parents have been told that religion will harm their education and they should report anyone involved in such activity. There are reports of job offers being withdrawn if applicants express Christian beliefs.

Persecution is increasing with repeated official messages stating



President Xi Jinping

that Christians are unpatriotic and their beliefs outdated and Western in origin. Harassment of individuals in or outside churches has increased as attitudes have hardened.

'The government under Xi Jinping wants to control everything, and currently Christianity is not fully under its control (as it sees it),' says our partner. 'Christianity is being pictured as unacceptable to an atheistic, communist country, rather than an acceptable but minority belief.'

It is anticipated that Christians will come under even greater pressure in 2023 with more calls for them to demonstrate unswerving allegiance to Xi Jinping by rejecting Christianity (and all religion).

PRAY

- Pray for Christians who have been arrested and imprisoned because of their refusal to deny Christ.
- Pray for the best Christian resources to reach pastors and leaders so that they are equipped to lead their congregations especially if these are divided into small groups.



PERSECUTION TRENDS 2023



Military parades help to fuel a nationalistic spirit in North Korea

NORTH KOREA

North Korean citizens (particularly those in provinces that border China) are becoming increasingly exposed to foreign influence through illegal trade connections and smuggled media devices.

'Due to this, the North Korean Government continues to be concerned about foreign powers interfering in North Korean society,' said Dr Eric Foley, CEO of our associate ministry Voice of the Martyrs Korea.

In order to combat foreign influence, Pyongyang invests in developing events and media that fuel a

The state continues to educate the public on the 'dangers' of clergy, missionaries and Bibles

nationalistic spirit yet still appeal to the changing tastes of the masses. Because Christianity is viewed through the lens of history as a tool which Western powers have used to colonise other countries, the state continues to educate the public on the 'dangers' of clergy, missionaries and Bibles.

Due to increasing apprehension toward unregulated Christianity on the part of the Chinese Government as well, North Korean defector believers living in China are facing increased persecution and regulation. Beijing has implemented surveillance and

restriction measures on text messages containing Christian content.

Owing to the spread of coronavirus in North Korea, Beijing is beginning to crack down on defectors illegally residing in China and shows signs of sending them back over the border, where they are generally interrogated over whether they have attended church, interacted with missionaries or received Bibles.

PRAY

- For North Koreans who have heard the gospel in China and are being forcibly repatriated to keep the faith and be a faithful witness in North Korea.
- Pray for defectors who continue to minister to other North Koreans in China; that God would continue to provide for their needs and for the needs of defector believers in South Korea.

'Thank you for praying for and supporting North Korean underground Christians. Please be encouraged to know that they are praying for you, too,' said Dr Foley.



SOUTH ASIA



INDIA

Pressure continues to mount on Christians from Hindu extremist groups who appear increasingly emboldened by the dominance of the nation's right-wing Hindu Government.

Reports of violent attacks on pastors and other Christians continued throughout the past year, as did the progress of anti-conversion laws. In September Karnataka became the latest state to introduce a 'conversion' law. While it is claimed they legislate against forced conversion, in practice they often open the door to legal opposition to gospel ministry.

The actions of various Hindu nationalist groups appear to have increased since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014. The National Solidarity Forum and Evangelical Fellowship of India noted around 500 reported attacks on Christians in 2021, with about 200 recorded in the first five months of 2022. Sadly many fear that trend could continue into 2023. Release International partners are becoming increasingly aware of long-term serious medical needs among those who have been badly beaten. They also highlight a growing need for Bibles, particularly in rural areas.

PRAY

- For protection for Christians, especially pastors and church leaders, and courage to persevere in an increasingly hostile environment.
- For an end to conversion laws.



Zafar Bhatti

PAKISTAN

Religious minorities in Pakistan are continuing to face frequent attacks and threats, including blasphemy charges, targeted killings, mob violence, forced conversions and destruction of worship places and graves. After the release of Asia Bibi, the Christian imprisoned on blasphemy charges, in 2018, extremist religious parties started to pressurise government institutions to enforce the blasphemy laws. Pakistan's judiciary is also

'The pressure of the blasphemy law and political discrimination continues and we have to face it every year'

under pressure as witnessed by the amending of a life sentence for blasphemy-accused Christian Zafar Bhatti to the death sentence.

Our partner reported an armed attack on a Christian colony in Balochistan in August in which three children were among those seriously injured. Sadly, it seems that, even after such incidents, the Government has taken little action.

'Pakistan is an Islamic state. The pressure of the blasphemy law and political discrimination continues and we have to face it every year,' said our partner.

PRAY

- That peace conferences between Christians and Muslims will reduce the pressure that many believers experience.

- For protection for believers especially those from non-Christian backgrounds.

'We thank Release International supporters for their prayers and passionate love for us. They always fill the gaps in our ministry and encourage us.'

Another partner also highlighted the fear of physical attack, which is heightened at Christmas and Easter, as well as the day-to-day discrimination and intimidation such as in education and employment. It added: *'The introduction of a heavily Islamic national education curriculum has caused a lot of confusion. It diminishes the status of non-Muslims.'*

AFGHANISTAN

The effects of the Taliban takeover in August 2021 were felt much more keenly in 2022 as its hardline stance became ever more apparent and violence increased. (For example, the denial of women's education and rights, and seemingly turning a blind eye to attacks on the minority Shia.) This hardline attitude flows over to those who are 'different' and may be Christian, both local and foreign.

Many Afghan Christians have fled the country or are living temporarily in neighbouring countries such as Pakistan or Iran, while those who remain have gone into hiding. Once again, the church has been decimated in Afghanistan while a massive earthquake, economic woes and an impending famine continue to

exacerbate hardships for all.

Some national Christian groups, working quietly, have been able to help Afghan refugees; and some believing Afghans in Pakistan have found an unexpected though cautious freedom in their faith. However, even here the threat of persecution is never far from their minds.

Christians in Afghanistan and the northern areas of Pakistan will continue to run the risk of discovery. Muslim-background believers (MBBs) especially have the constant fear of discovery, betrayal, exposure and attack.

PRAY

- For converts who experience isolation and lack of Christian fellowship and struggle to access the Bible. They cannot share their faith with others for fear of reprisal, while the pressure to return to their former faith communities can be intense.
- Pray that the ban on Afghans travelling to neighbouring countries is lifted.

Our partner said: *'Release's financial and prayer support is part of the reason why our ministry is able to continue and develop. The level of suffering in the region is huge... yet in the midst of it all, our ministry is flourishing — and seeing an increase in responses. This has to be answered prayer. Thank you for your support and prayers, especially for the vulnerable seekers and believers we minister to.'*



The presence of the Taliban has caused many to flee Afghanistan



SOUTH- EAST ASIA



MALAYSIA

Due to Covid restrictions mainstream churches have suffered as the Government has kept them closed. Mosques became operational with full capacity long before churches were allowed to re-open, and with only 50 per cent capacity. Some who have spoken out about this imbalance have been promptly silenced with warnings of imprisonment.

'Persecution is definitely increasing as the Government plans to form an Islamic nation and wants to be ruled by sharia (Islamic law) only,' said our

partner. In order to do this, it needs to achieve a majority of Muslims in the country, thus there is a drive to convert people to Islam.

Elections are due to be held in 2023 and, depending on the result, significant changes are expected within the coming years. *'Churches need to be more aware of the agenda, but out of fear and various other reasons they have turned a blind eye to the situation, while at the same time avoiding fellowship with anyone coming to the Lord from an Islamic background.'*

PRAY

- Pray for more open houses for fellowship for those who cannot go to public places of worship.

Our partner said: *'Release has been and always will be part of our Malaysian fellowship as its concern and love for the persecuted church are so real. Not only are their prayers and support essential, but so is their personal presence on a regular basis.'*

'To all its supporters, we want you to know that your support is a blessing to many, and many have found the strength to worship our living God, just with knowing that they are not forgotten or abandoned.'

MIDDLE EAST



IRAN

During 2022 the authorities particularly targeted those who were involved in any kind of ministry.

'Whilst we give thanks to the Lord that there has not been a wave of persecution against those who have converted (even though some of these can face opposition from family or harassment in their work or studies) there is obviously a campaign to try to stop the spread of Christianity, to arrest those who are leading house churches

and those 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 to stem this. In fact their overall goal is to exterminate the Persian-speaking church and only allow the Christian minority groups to operate. Longer prison sentences are being given by the courts to some Christian workers and over the past months two key Armenian leaders have each been sentenced to ten years and others to sentences varying between six and eight years.'

'There is no doubt that the Government of Iran is upset and concerned that disillusioned Muslims are becoming Christians.'

Our partner added that converts, particularly leaders, were likely to face increasing pressures in 2023. The fear of persecution has also led to an exodus of some believers from Iran, which is likely to continue this coming year.

PRAY

- For protection of house churches. In view of security pressures, believers

are meeting in smaller groups than before. Pray against a spirit of fear, and that they will know God's peace and presence. Christian satellite programmes and social media are a lifeline for many.

- Pray for those in prison because of their ministry, especially those with lengthy sentences. May they know God's presence and stay strong in their faithful witness.

EGYPT

Besides the subtle day-to-day persecution that Christians face in the community, workplaces, schools and universities in various parts of the country, persecution is always most intense in Upper Egypt. Any conflict between Christians and Muslims most often concludes with the blame (and any consequences) placed on the Christians. As a result they may have to leave their homes at short notice or face dire consequences.

Persecution was at its height between 2011 and 2013 during the post-revolution season and Muslim Brotherhood (MB) regime. Following the latter, persecution decreased

significantly because it was no longer endorsed by the Government. However, persecution remains constant among the impoverished, under-educated parts of Upper Egypt since it is deeply ingrained in the minds and culture of many extremist groups there.

'The pressures Christians face are likely to continue. The Russia-Ukraine crisis is currently the biggest source of economic/financial pressure, particularly on the already very poor and on daily wage earners who go for days and weeks without any income,' said our partner.

PRAY

- For the current economic crisis, which is taking a heavy toll on the poorest, many of whom are Christians.
- For safety for partner workers as they travel to meet and support persecuted believers.

'We are thankful that we were able to meet the needs of the most desperately impoverished families this year because of the stability of funds provided by Release International. Thank you!'

VIEW FROM THE TOP

CEOs from our associate ministries highlight particular areas of concern for 2023

Cole Richards, head of Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) in the US, points to the rise of Islamic extremism across Africa as a major cause for concern this coming year.

'Even in countries where Christians are in the majority they are experiencing persecution. Sadly that trend in places like Mozambique, Kenya, Cameroon and Uganda will continue in 2023.'

'Our work has increased sevenfold and even that doesn't meet the need!' he said.

The latest conflict in Mozambique had been marked by tremendous violence with Christians suffering the worst. Thousands have been killed or driven from their homes. In the Central African Republic and Ethiopia tens of thousands of families have been displaced and that number is set to rise.

His counterpart in Canada, Floyd Brobbel, pinpoints three areas of concern: the growing number of attacks against Christians in Nigeria, the underground church in Afghanistan and the dangers believers face in southern Mexico.

'Persecution used to be predominantly in the north of Nigeria but now it is spreading to the central and southern regions; there seems no clear resolution.'

'There is a small underground Christian community in Afghanistan but the Taliban will recognise when people no longer go to the mosques or take part in other Islamic activities so we expect an increase in persecution in the coming months.'

'As for Mexico, it is becoming increasingly dangerous. Persecution comes from four persecuting groups: indigenous/animist; Catholic/animist blend; Zapatistas and paramilitary drug groups. Animists are pressurising evangelicals to join their pagan festivals. If they refuse, they run the risk of losing their land and property and becoming nomads. There have been church burnings, arrests and even martyrdom.'

However, like Cole, Floyd finds cause for celebration not just in the numbers of people coming to faith in countries where there is severe persecution but also in non-religious developments such as the appointment of a Christian to the head of the Supreme Court in Egypt.

Tony Benjamin of VOM Australia shares that sense of optimism in regard to conversions in the Middle East and also in China, where he believes that President Xi will *'continue to squeeze the church and any ideology opposed to communism in 2023'*.

It seems that the next 12 months will be a significant period for large swathes of the church across the globe in which numbers will increase just as persecution intensifies.

Standing firm amid the devastation



Christians are still reaching out with hope and help in a nation on the brink, writes Laura Hayes

Despite the ongoing chaos in Burkina Faso, Christians are risking their lives to spread the gospel and help persecuted believers, our partner Dr Susanna* told me.

There were two military coups in 2022 and the former President was forced into exile. Recent reports from the UN on Burkina Faso, which is one of several countries that make up the Sahel, are deeply concerning: due to the continued jihadist insurgency, many parts of the country have been cut off and people are facing starvation. One report documents how mothers are feeding their

children on 'salt and leaves'. It is a tragedy on a vast scale with more than 1.5 million people including many Christian families fleeing towards the capital Ouagadougou to access aid and find safety.

Susanna is concerned for her friends and partners on the ground there. She says: 'The situation is now changing for the worse. The first coup was in January and was led by the military leader [Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba]. The army suspended the constitution and dissolved the national assembly. The situation became very chaotic and

our partners didn't know what was going on, there was no internet and the country felt changed. For the first few weeks after the military came to power, it was kind of peaceful, there was quiet on the streets of Ouagadougou and in the provinces, but very quickly the jihadists started to attack again. Everyone was thinking that [Damiba], who started to run the country from the end of January, would deal with the jihadists, because he promised the people he would fight with them. He said that he would provide food because he didn't like the politics before, so everyone was hoping the situation would change for the better. Unfortunately it was not the case.'



**Christian
refugees in
Burkina Faso
still need
our help.
Stock photo**

Susanna continued: *'So in the nine months from January to September 2022 the situation got worse and worse. In July there was a huge attack on a military convoy that was transporting food, and many were killed; the jihadists just wanted to kill those giving help, of all religions, and that was horrific. But what was worse was that the politicians tried to hide that they were failing and not capable of dealing with the situation. People were waiting for more than two months but there was no public information about how many people had been killed or injured. The military kept telling the people to calm down and promised "we will tell you later". They asked the media not to publish anything. So people were just*

waiting and waiting but there was no information, nothing.'

Susanna said that Christians were at particularly high risk and were persecuted by jihadists. Many had to flee their homes, but were also reaching their neighbours in the refugee camps and sharing the gospel. *'They had a good response,'* she adds. *'The families of the new believers were also with them as they changed their religion, so it was very risky for them.'*

In September the Government sent 150 lorries with food and medicine to the northern commune of Gaskinde but the aid convoy was attacked. Reports said 37 soldiers and aid workers were killed. Susanna adds: *'Again no information was put out on the news at the time and no official information was given.'*

At this point the mood on the streets of Ouagadougou started to turn against the new military government with many calling for action and even rioting. As a result there was a second coup, headed by a young military leader, Ibrahim Traore. The former President, who had been in charge

'They are so bold. They are so committed even though the situation is so dangerous'

for only nine months, fled to Togo with his family. A few weeks after the coup, the new authorities started to provide food to refugee camps; Christian refugees who were starving to death in many refugee camps at last had some help. *'But they still desperately need our help,'* says Susanna.

The situation is still very insecure and unstable but Susanna adds: *'There is much to be thankful to the Lord for. In the midst of all of this we have Christians who stand firm, they go and they preach the gospel. Our local partners are still trying to support local Christians [who have been displaced] in and around Ouagadougou. Last week they were going to visit persecuted children in the towns outside the capital, to help them.'*

The local partner called her and

said that even though there were explosions and shootings on the street – it was the start of the second coup – they were still going to help. *'We must go to help, we prayed about this and it is time to go. We have to go, despite the risks,'* they told her.

Susanna adds: *'It is amazing; they are so bold. They are so committed even though the situation is so dangerous.'*

However, their bus was stopped on the way back so the group decided to walk the 20 kilometres home in the dark. *'It took them five hours and they had to hide along the way in case soldiers or jihadists would shoot them. That was so brave of them.'*

She adds: *'Please do remember Burkina Faso in your prayers!'*

PRAY

- For wisdom for the country's new leader especially in choosing the right people for the government
- For a willingness to engage with the international community
- For food and other aid to reach the needy (there are food shortages because of the Ukraine-Russia war)
- For safety for Christians, especially ministry workers and new believers
- That Dr Susanna's team will be able to help their local partners

**Name changed for security reasons*

(Sources include africanews.com; aljazeera.com)



Children are among those who have had to flee



ARE YOU UP FOR THE BATTLE?

Co-ordinating prayer for persecuted Christians is a vital part of our ministry

Prayer is key to our relationship with God yet can often be one of the hardest spiritual disciplines. No wonder it is an area that the enemy attacks us on.

'Our partners know this all too well, having seen many answers to prayer: people set free from prison, protection from the authorities, supernatural escapes from persecution and so on,' says our Volunteering Ambassador Imtiaz.

'But one thing that always amazes me is the Christians in the UK who not only understand the power of prayer, but, as our Prayer Co-ordinators, commit to pray for, and organise prayer for, those they have never met.'

These volunteers facilitate prayer groups that pray specifically for persecuted Christians either on a weekly, monthly or sometimes less frequent basis. *'The important thing is that they continue to meet regularly to lift up our suffering brothers and sisters to the throne of the One who answers.'*

We are now looking for more people

to take up this vital role. The Bible says: 'For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Ephesians 6:12). Can you support us in this?

Here is what one of our Prayer Co-ordinators, Lyn, says about the role:

'It wasn't happening locally, so I took the initiative. If I were the one suffering for my faith, how grateful I would be to know that others are praying for me!' She adds: 'It widens our perspective on the family of God and can prevent us from becoming too insular and focused only on our own church, neighbourhood and country. Care and concern for our brothers and sisters grow through praying for them. The Lord wants us to pray for one another in the body of Christ. The Bible says, "carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). We can learn so much through their faith and courage in adversity.'

Another Prayer Co-ordinator, Roberta, says:

'Meeting each month enables us to mention individuals by name and focus on a particular country or part of the world. The needs are vast and we only cover a limited amount but there is a common desire in our praying. I would definitely recommend the prayer group to others because, as well as praying, we make participants more aware of the persecution that's going on in so many parts of the world. Even in our churches there are people who have no idea what's happening.'

Roberta adds: *'It is important to have concentrated prayer [for the persecuted] from a committed group.'*

Could you support our suffering brothers and sisters in this way?

We will provide you with practical tips on how to set up a prayer group, as well as exclusive materials not available to others. Email volunteer@releaseinternational.org for more information or call us on 01689 823491.



Barn-storming production back on the road

Since launching in September 2021, *If Prison Walls Could Speak* has reached thousands of people with the powerful testimony of Petr Jasek, from the main stage at the Keswick Convention to a small barn in rural South Devon.

'We've been honoured to perform to an incredibly diverse cross-section of audiences, who have been re-invigorated to pray for persecuted Christians,' said Artless's artistic director, Jon Maltz.

Petr, a Release International partner, was imprisoned in Sudan for his ministry to persecuted believers in 2015.

'We were immensely privileged to stage the play in Westminster alongside the Government's conference on freedom of religion and belief, with Petr in attendance as well as Fiona Bruce MP,' said Jon. (Visit the Artless YouTube channel to hear Petr and Fiona's post-show talks.)

He added: *'As we head into 2023 we're excited to take the show back on the road, and see how God will continue to use this production.'*

As well as a number of dates in England Artless will be performing in Scotland in January and hope to visit Northern Ireland later in the year.

CONFIRMED DATES

January

- 19th Allander Evangelical Church, Glasgow (ticketed)
- 20th Smithton, Inverness
- 21st St George's Tron, Glasgow (ticketed)
- 22nd Mowbray Community Church
- 24th Ilkley Baptist Church

March

- 1st Surrey Chapel, Norwich
- 3rd St John's, Southend
- 4th St Patrick's, Wallington
- 6th Oakhall Church, Caterham
- 12th Rugby Elim

Check our website for further information.

Nigeria campaign 2023

This year we are launching a major campaign to raise awareness about the ongoing plight of persecuted believers in Nigeria. We will be encouraging supporters not only to pray themselves but also to organise prayer in their churches.

Nigeria is at a pivotal point in its history (see Trends report pages 12-17). Not only are there forthcoming elections, taking place against a backdrop of ongoing violence against Christian communities, but there is the push in some quarters for the nation to become an Islamic state and even for parts of it to become independent.

We will be launching the campaign, called *'Out of these Ashes'*, in the next edition of *Voice* and will be providing extensive materials for supporter use.

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:

Jonny on 07861 656269

Midlands & North:

Allister on 07916 396178

Scotland:

James on 07434 894016

Wales & West of England:

Paul on 07861 651139

Feat that brings good news



After two years of delay caused in no small part by Covid, Release International supporter Peter Price (pictured) was finally able to run the gruelling Comrades Marathon in South Africa and in the process raise a tremendous £600-plus to help persecuted believers!

'It was a tough day and I feared not being able to beat the 12-hour time limit, but somehow my determination saw me through and I finished in 10 hours 55 minutes,' he said.

The 90km race includes a number of hills and many runners are unable to finish in the time. *'I struggled with injuries which impacted my training, so I thought it likely that I wouldn't finish,'* said Peter.

Thank you to everyone who supported Peter's fundraising effort. Donations can still be made on his justgiving.com page (search 'peter-price18').

Living under oppression does not mean the church cannot thrive, writes Jack Norman

It was the worst of times?

The book of Daniel has much to teach us about life in a state of oppression. Daniel and his friends had lived through the reformation years of King Josiah, yet, when we see them for the first time, their whole system of worship had been destroyed, the temple in Jerusalem ransacked, and they had been taken off as prisoners by a foreign king determined to assimilate them into his own culture and belief systems.

In this new, oppressive environment, they lived each day with the threat of imprisonment, or even death, if they stepped out of line and dared to challenge what the king said.

In these challenging circumstances they would have been strengthened by a letter they received from the prophet Jeremiah, encouraging them to stand firm in their faith. They were the remnant through whom God was continuing to prove Himself faithful, he told them. Jeremiah even encouraged them to be a blessing to the nation which had taken them prisoner, exalting them to continue trusting the Lord and living out their faith – and live it out they did. They trusted fully in God, at one point declaring that even if they were to die at the hands of their captors, they would not bow down to the false gods of Babylon. And they continued to work hard to be a blessing in their new, oppressive environment.

There are many who stand in line with them today. Living in repressive states they continue to act as good citizens, seeking to be a blessing to those around them, yet unwilling to bow the

knee to authorities that seek to put themselves above God.

Just as Daniel was watched by those around him, who reported him to the king for not following his decrees, Christians in China are constantly

‘Wang Yi knew he was being watched, but continued faithfully leading his church and continued training others in Christian ministry’

watched, even having cameras placed in their churches to monitor them as they worship. Where they displease the government, prison can await, as it did for Pastor Wang Yi who is serving a nine-year sentence handed down in 2019.

Like Daniel, Wang Yi knew he was being watched, but continued faithfully

leading his church, continued training others in Christian ministry, and continued inviting others to know Christ for themselves. Like Daniel and his three friends, Wang Yi was prepared to face the consequences of his actions.

For Daniel and all those in exile, the oppression they endured during the 70 years of exile may indeed have felt like the worst of times, but we know that God was working for the good; He remained faithful.

We may look at the oppression of the Chinese Communist Party and conclude that it is indeed the worst of times for Christians in China, but we know already that God has used this time in China to grow His church in unprecedented ways. Perhaps we might conclude that in God’s economy, even under such great oppression, it is very much the best of times in China!

INSPIRING FAITH



‘Christianity is the only profession in the world in which men remain disciples for life and never become independent workers.’

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.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

ALL FOR JESUS

A PERSECUTED DISCIPLESHIP
STUDY COURSE

KENNETH HARROD

All for Jesus

'The course has helped me enormously to understand that God's word has so much application to truly support and answer difficult questions - even on persecution and suffering.'

- A five-part study ideal for small groups
- The course focuses on Christian discipleship and how persecution informs, challenges and shapes what it means to live as a disciple of Christ
- Each study focuses on a passage of Scripture and there are notes for group leaders at the back
- Ideal course for Lent or any time of the year
- The 50-page booklet is available for £4 - plus we offer a special discount for churches buying copies for groups: just £9 for ten copies

Order at releaseinternational.org/shop or call
01689 823491.

Regular support is vital

Regular giving (even small amounts) through a Direct Debit helps us to plan ministry support around the world. It is a great way to show ongoing love and concern for persecuted believers.

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Date

Thank you!

Yes, I want to partner with Release International

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Make each payment on the ☐ 1st or ☐ 15th of the month, beginning on

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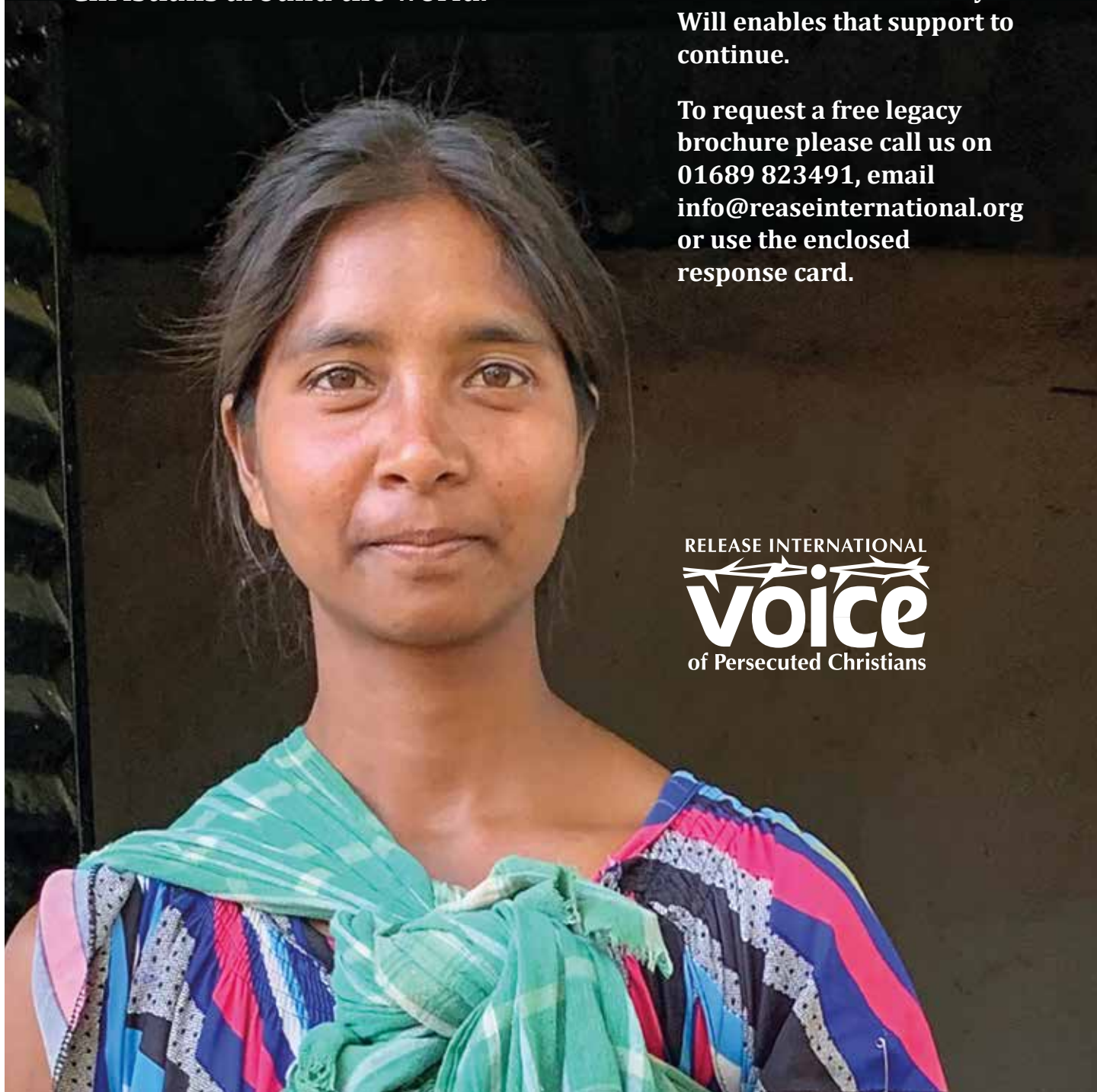
Use the tear-off section of the letter or the Connect and Support card to set up your Direct Debit. Please make sure you include your name and address on the card.

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

releaseinternational.org

prayershield

January – March 2023



'Persecution... is part of our faith. We must be patient through this.' Persecuted Lao Christian MaLaiWan

JANUARY 2023

*Heavenly Father,
Please remind my persecuted
brothers and sisters that You
are with them in all that they
face today.*

*Lord, help them not to retaliate,
but to stand firm in their faith.
Give them wisdom to know when
to seek justice – and when to
show mercy.*

*Help them, Lord, to forgive. Give
them the strength to endure the
darker days knowing that they
will 'share in the inheritance
of [Your] holy people in the
kingdom of light' (Colossians
1:12).*

*In Jesus' name,
Amen*

LAOS

SUNDAY 1: Let's pray for believers in Laos and globally who start the new year with a sense of dread, fearing yet more persecution and harassment. Pray that God will remind them of His unshakeable love.

MONDAY 2: Lao Christians are often persecuted by relatives and officials who are afraid that Christians might 'offend the spirits'. Pray that entire villages will meet with the Holy Spirit.

TUESDAY 3: MaLaiWan (pictured) was thrown out by her family after she became a Christian at 16. Praise God that her father and siblings

became Christians a few years later, after attending her wedding.

WEDNESDAY 4: Pray that Christians who suffer rejection and abandonment will find fellowship with other believers to help them stand firm in their faith.

THURSDAY 5: Only four per cent of Laotians are Christians. Pray that God will multiply His church in that nation.

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians



Danjuma from Nigeria stands firm in his faith despite being brutally attacked when he was 13

NIGERIA

FRIDAY 6: Pray for peace in the run-up to and aftermath of presidential elections in Nigeria next month. Pray that different faith groups will set aside their enmity and commit to religious tolerance.

SATURDAY 7: Thank God for Danjuma (pictured) who was attacked with machetes, blinded and left for dead by Islamist militants eight years ago. After many operations and extensive rehabilitation, he is now at secondary school. He has forgiven his attackers.

SUNDAY 8: Militants killed ten Christians in raids on villages in Keana county, Nasarawa state, in October. Most of those killed were women, children and the elderly. Pray for the bereaved and injured.

MONDAY 9: Pray for Christians in Benue state: more than 70

Christians were killed in Gbeji in October and more than 100 were shot and injured in Udei and Yelewata.

TUESDAY 10: Pray for the release of five Christian girls – Elizabeth, Esther, Rebecca, Neempere and Bilha – who were kidnapped by Islamic State West Africa Province in Kebbi state in June 2021.

WEDNESDAY 11: Continue to pray for the release of Leah Sharibu, a Christian kidnapped with more than 100 other girls in Dapchi, Yobe, in 2018. All but Leah were later released: she had refused to deny Christ.

THURSDAY 12: Pray for the safe return of the pastor and several members of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church in Suleja, Niger state, who were kidnapped by militants during a prayer vigil in September.

FRIDAY 13: More than 57 worshippers were kidnapped when militants raided a church in Kasuwan Magani in Kaduna state. As many as 14 reportedly escaped – but pray for those who remain captive.

SATURDAY 14: Pray for more than 6,000 Christians from Logo, Guma and Gwer West areas of Benue state who were displaced following attacks in September. At least 25 Christians were killed in three weeks.

SUNDAY 15: Pray for the Assemblies of God Church in Shikal village, Plateau state, where tribal animists assaulted members of the congregation and destroyed equipment. Attacks on churches by tribal animists are on the rise.

MYANMAR

MONDAY 16: Pray for churches in Myanmar which are suffering violence and persecution at the hands of the ruling military junta, amid fighting between Government and rebels.

TUESDAY 17: The military requisitioned a church in Moby, Shan state, for use as a kitchen then planted land mines around it before they left. Pray for church members: one said the church's desecration felt like 'destroying our hearts'.

WEDNESDAY 18: The military in Myanmar has extended its emergency rule till at least 2023, reportedly to stabilise the country. Pray that this

deferring of democracy will not mean a further erosion of religious rights.

THURSDAY 19: Ask God to protect the many brave believers in Myanmar who proclaim the gospel whatever the cost, including indigenous church planters and missionaries.

FRIDAY 20: Pray in faith that one day Myanmar will have leaders who respect the religious rights of all people.

IRAN

SATURDAY 21: Pray for members of house churches in Iran. Some have reported increased pressure amid protests following the death in custody of a young woman arrested by morality police.

SUNDAY 22: Thank God that Naser Navard Gol-Tapeh was recently pardoned and released from prison. He had been sentenced to ten years in jail for his house church activities in 2017.

MONDAY 23: Pray for Fariba Dalir, a Christian with a Muslim background, who was pardoned and released from Evin Prison in October. In 2021, she was sentenced to five years in prison, later reduced to two years.

TUESDAY 24: Homayoun Zhavah and his wife Sara Ahmadi were detained in Evin Prison in August, to serve two and eight-year sentences respectively. Pray for their release: Homayoun suffers from advanced Parkinson's disease.

WEDNESDAY 25: Pray for Joseph Shahbazian, who recently began serving a ten-year sentence in Evin Prison for leading a house church.

THURSDAY 26: Pray for online and satellite broadcaster SAT-7, a Release International partner providing encouragement and support for believers inside Iran and across the Middle East.

FRIDAY 27: Pray that online church gatherings, such as Persian Community Church, will bring important connections and fellowship for believers in Iran.

SATURDAY 28: Believers from Iran who have resettled in Turkey and joined refugee churches are experiencing increasing pressure from the Turkish authorities. Pray that God will protect and provide for them.

SUNDAY 29: Pray for safety and spiritual refreshing for Iranian believers travelling to training events in Turkey. Pray that this will strengthen their witness to friends and family back home.

MONDAY 30: Pray for the Iranian families who have received support such as warm clothing through a Release International partner. Pray that they will know they are not forgotten.

TUESDAY 31: Thank God that the church in Iran continues to expand, amid growing disillusionment with other religions. Pray that His word will touch hearts and lives in miraculous ways.

FEBRUARY 2023 CHINA

WEDNESDAY 1: Pray for Pastor Pan Yongguang and 60 members of the Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church (pictured) who were forced to leave China for South Korea two years ago, after sustained persecution. South Korea has refused to grant them asylum.

THURSDAY 2: Pray for wisdom for Pastor Pan Yongguang as he considers the future of the exiled Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church (above). He has suffered years of regular interrogations by officials.

FRIDAY 3: Henan house church leader Chen Lijun has been charged with fraud: his wife, Li Xiaoyan, believes his arrest is linked to buying Christian books online and his faith. Pray that all charges against Chen will be dropped.

SATURDAY 4: Pray for preacher Dai Zhichao of Chengdu Early Rain Covenant Church, Sichuan province, who has been under house arrest for months.

SUNDAY 5: Continue to pray for Dong Zhao and his family as they build new lives in the US after a treacherous journey to flee persecution in China in 2021. Dong had been interrogated and tortured.

'I firmly believe that my life belongs to Jesus Christ.'

Persecuted Chinese pastor Pan Yongguang



Persecution forced 60 members of the Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church to leave China for South Korea

MONDAY 6: Pray for staff and students at three Christian schools in Wenzhou, Zhejiang province, which have been forcibly closed by officials. Pastor Huang Jianle and three teachers at Canaan Seminary were arrested.

TUESDAY 7: Ji Chungang organised a Christian training event in Zhejiang province and recently received a £18,000 fine for holding an event without authorisation. Pray that he will not have to pay this fine.

WEDNESDAY 8: Pray for Linfen Covenant House Church: 70 members were detained in August, then released. Li Jie, Han Xiaodong and Wang Qiang were later charged with fraud.

THURSDAY 9: Pray for Lian Changnian, Lian Xuliang and Fu Juan, all members of The Church of Abundance in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, who were detained in August. Other members have been interrogated, beaten and threatened.

SUDAN

FRIDAY 10: The military coup of October 2021 threatens to undo some of the advances in religious freedom won since 2019 when Omar al-Bashir's dictatorship ended. Pray Sudan will choose more, not less, religious freedom.

SATURDAY 11: Some of the harshest aspects of Islamic law were removed from the statute book after President al-Bashir was deposed. Pray they will not be reinstated.

SUNDAY 12: Sudanese Christians in some areas are experiencing increasing harassment and persecution. Pray that God will renew in them a 'steadfast spirit' (Psalm 51:10).

MONDAY 13: Thank God that a court in Sudan has dismissed apostasy charges against four Christians with a Muslim background in Central Darfur state. They had been facing the death penalty.

TUESDAY 14: Pray for Sudanese Christian couple Nada and Hamouda. They were charged with adultery when a court ruled their marriage was 'invalid' after Hamouda became a Christian. Since Nada too turned to Christ, they have been charged with apostasy.

WEDNESDAY 15: An apostasy charge can make a Sudanese Christian a target for attack, even if it is later dropped. Please pray God's protection over the six Christians (above) who have recently faced this charge in Sudan.

THURSDAY 16: Continue to pray for Christians in the contested Nuba Mountain, Blue Nile and Darfur regions on Sudan's border with South Sudan, where persecution has persisted for years.

AFGHANISTAN

FRIDAY 17: Taliban rule in Afghanistan is adding to pressures upon hard-pressed Christians. Pray that they will find ways to

connect with other believers and draw strength from this fellowship.

SATURDAY 18: Pray for the provision of essential food and fuel for Christian families during the harsh Afghan winter.

SUNDAY 19: Thank God for significant Christian growth among some people groups in Afghanistan, especially the Hazaras. Pray that God will protect them.

MONDAY 20: Pray that believers throughout Afghanistan will receive spiritual refreshment so they can share God's love, even if they cannot speak about Him openly.

UKRAINE

TUESDAY 21: Pray for Christians and churches in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine, who are suffering persecution.

WEDNESDAY 22: Pray for Sergey Pantyukhov and his Baptist church in Russian-occupied Mariupol. Officials interrogated Sergey about the ownership of his church's building in October.

THURSDAY 23: Praise God for the recent release of Pastor Leonid Ponomarev and his wife, Tatyana, who led Kurchatov Church in Mariupol. They were held by Russian soldiers for a month.

FRIDAY 24: On the first anniversary of the 2022 Russian invasion, pray that the Ukrainian church will be salt and light as it serves

'They threw out all our possessions, including all our Christian literature.'

Baptist pastor from Lysychansk on Russian military takeover of his church in Ukraine

local communities. Pray that many people will want to get to know the One whom the church represents.

SATURDAY 25: Pray for a Baptist congregation in Lysychansk in the Luhansk Region, whose church was seized in July. It has been used by the Russian-controlled city administration.

SUNDAY 26: The Russian military expelled Christians from their church and rehabilitation centre in Manhush, near Mariupol, in June. Pray that this congregation will continue to enjoy strong fellowship.

MONDAY 27: Pray for Christians in Melitopol where three churches have been forcibly shut by Russian troops recently: Grace Baptist Church, Melitopol Christian Church and Word of Life Church.

TUESDAY 28: Pray for wisdom for church leaders in occupied parts of Ukraine as they face unreasonable demands from governing authorities. Pray that their witness will cause their oppressors to want to know more about Jesus.

MARCH 2023

INDONESIA

WEDNESDAY 1: The rise of Islamist extremism in Indonesia has encouraged violence against Christians, including suicide bombings targeting churches. Pray that moderate Muslims will stand against intolerance and that extremism will only make people more open to the gospel of Jesus.

THURSDAY 2: Ask God to protect Christians in West Java and Aceh, where extremist groups have a strong influence on society and politics.

FRIDAY 3: Pray for Christians on Java Island, whose plans to build a new Maranatha Church are being opposed by officials and Islamist organisations. Many church planning applications take decades to process.

SATURDAY 4: Local officials have denied a congregation the right to build a place of worship near Jakarta, even though they own the land. Pray for tenacity and wisdom as the church appeals this decision.

SUNDAY 5: Thank God that a congregation in Tangerang City has finally received notice that a building permit has been issued – after first applying more than 30 years ago.

MONDAY 6: Pray against the influence of militant groups seeking to sway justice

and discriminate against Christians.

TUESDAY 7: Please pray for the Christian workers who are able to receive ministry training on an Indonesian island because Release International pays their travel costs.

PAKISTAN

WEDNESDAY 8: Thank God for the courage of three young men (pictured right) who continue to share the gospel, despite being detained by police for 52 days for distributing Christian leaflets.

THURSDAY 9: Street evangelism is legal in Pakistan yet often opposed. Pray that God will protect those who share His word, especially in areas where anti-Christian feelings run high.

FRIDAY 10: Pray for those living in rural, tribal and remote areas of Pakistan where few people have Bibles. Ask God to provide funding and access for those trying to reach them.

SATURDAY 11: Pray for the safe return of a 13-year-old girl who was kidnapped, forcibly converted and married in April. Her Christian family had previously helped her 'husband' in the midst of a financial crisis.

SUNDAY 12: An estimated 1,000 women from religious minorities, including Christians, are forcibly



converted and married each year in Pakistan. Pray that the Government will commit to ending this abuse.

MONDAY 13: Pray for Christians among the many affected by recent devastating flooding, which claimed more than 1,700 lives. Believers are often treated as second-class citizens and sidelined in relief efforts.

UGANDA

TUESDAY 14: Pray for evangelists Robert Okia and Wilberforce Mutenga who were beaten and slashed with knives in eastern Uganda after leading eight people to Christ. They want to continue their outreach.

WEDNESDAY 15: Pray for evangelists Andrew Dikusooka and Ronald



A team of young men were detained for distributing Christian literature in Pakistan – yet continue to share their faith

Musasizi who survived a knife attack. They had just led several people to Christ after debating Islamic scholars in Iganga district.

THURSDAY 16: Pray for the family of Namata Habiiba, a 23-year-old poisoned to death in eastern Uganda after she became a Christian. A relative is suspected of her murder.

FRIDAY 17: Neighbours angry about his conversion to Christ flogged Musa Wabwire with sticks and destroyed his family home in Kaliro district. Pray for Musa and his family who are now in hiding.

'We have to continue with the message no matter the persecution.'

Persecuted evangelist Wilberforce Mutenga, Uganda

SATURDAY 18: Falida Nazziwa from Kiboga district was beaten and abandoned by her husband after she became a Christian. Ask God to provide for her and her children.

SUNDAY 19: On Mother's Day, let's remember mothers like Falida (above) in Uganda and worldwide who have chosen Christ over a comfortable life for their children. Ask God to remind them he keeps 'his covenant of love to a thousand generations' (Deuteronomy 7:9).

MONDAY 20: Pray for Shadia Namuzungu from Kibuku district, who was attacked two days after she put her faith in Christ. She had been healed of a chronic stomach problem. Her crops and home were also damaged.

LIBYA

TUESDAY 21: Ask God to sustain believers in war-torn Libya, who cannot practise their faith openly. Pray that they will know His peace that transcends all understanding.

WEDNESDAY 22: Pray for a believer with a Muslim background who was recently sentenced to death for apostasy by an appeals court in western Libya. He has refused to deny Christ.

THURSDAY 23: The death sentence for apostasy is based on a law rescinded by the current Parliament based in Tobruk, yet courts can choose which laws apply in their jurisdiction. Pray that apostasy will be decriminalised across Libya.

FRIDAY 24: Evangelistic work in Libya is strictly opposed. Pray that the word of God will spread through this nation and revive a thirsty land.

INDIA

SATURDAY 25: Pray for Indrakla and her family in Uttar Pradesh. They have suffered assaults and threats since Indrakla and five others were arrested at her son's birthday party on false accusations of forced conversion.

SUNDAY 26: Pray that God will thwart the efforts of Hindu-nationalist informants, present in nearly every village in India, who report on the activities of believers.

MONDAY 27: Pray for believers in Karnataka state which officially enacted anti-conversion laws in September. Such laws in other states have frequently been misused against religious minorities.

TUESDAY 28: Pray for justice for Madhab Gorai whose close relatives are suspected of his murder in West Bengal. Madhab's wife and son had publicly threatened to kill him after he refused to reject Christ.



Persecuted Indian Christians Durgawati (left) and Gulsan (centre) read the Scriptures with a friend

WEDNESDAY 29: India's 30 to 70 million Christians make up only five per cent of the population. Pray that faith as small as a mustard seed can move mountains – and change societies.

THURSDAY 30: Pray for Durgawati and her nephew Gulsan (pictured) who were punished by their family and thrown out of their village for

refusing to stop sharing their faith. They now live with a pastor in a nearby village.

FRIDAY 31: Pastor and taxi-driver Sukhdev Mark gave a gospel tract to a passenger in Haryana state. The same man booked the pastor's cab a second time and lured him into an ambush where Pastor Sukhdev was stabbed. Pray for his complete healing.

Lord Jesus,

May my prayer be set before You like incense (Psalm 141:2). Thank You, Lord, that You hear me.

Jesus, You live to intercede for us (Hebrews 7:25), our advocate in Heaven. So, I lift to You my brothers and sisters who suffer in Your name – and ask that Almighty God will defend and strengthen them.

Precious Jesus, I pray that You will fill them afresh today with Your love, Your peace and Your joy, and remind them that You are with them, always.

Amen

Sources: 222 Ministries; China Aid; Forum 18; International Christian Concern; Middle East Concern; Morning Star News; Release International partners and contacts; UCA News; VOM Canada; VOM Korea; VOM USA.

Some names have been changed to protect identities.

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

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