

## Prayer Focus 11/08

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### □ IRAQ – DEADLY CAMPAIGN DRIVES CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OUT OF MOSUL

Thousands of Iraqi Christians have fled the city of Mosul in northern Iraq after a deadly campaign was launched to remove the Christian community from the city in early October. At least 14 Christians, including a 15-year-old boy, have been murdered, many of them killed execution-style by gunmen. Other estimates suggest that as many as 25 or even 40 Christians might have been killed. Five Christian homes have been blown up after the families had been told to leave. Many believe that the extremists behind the campaign are linked to al-Qaeda, but some suggest that Kurds might be responsible as many of the attacks happened in areas controlled by Kurdish militia.

Despite efforts by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to convince the Christians to stay and “not to give in to the criminal plan” of driving out the Christian community from Mosul, the number of Christian families fleeing the city and seeking refuge in churches, towns and villages to the north and east of Mosul reached 1,350 on 15 October. Many of them are in desperate need of food, clothes, bedding, items for personal hygiene and other basic necessities, which Barnabas Fund is helping to provide.

Earlier in October leaflets were distributed in Mosul, threatening Christians with death unless they convert to Islam or pay the Islamic *jizya* tax that marks them as second-class citizens. The leaflets, which are an effective tactic used before in Baghdad and elsewhere, were condemned by the Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq and by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. One source reported that on Thursday, 9 October, extremists drove around the Mosul neighbourhood of Sukkar, shouting through a loudspeaker that Christians would be attacked unless they left the city. Others reported that false checkpoints were set up in the city to stop cars and check IDs. Christians were told to leave the city within 24 hours. One Christian family were told by three young people who came to their home to leave or convert to Islam.

**• *Pray for an end to the deadly campaign against Christians in Mosul. Thank God for Muslims who have condemned the attacks. Pray that the people of Mosul will stand together with the Christian community against the extremists so that they will not succeed in their attempt to drive out all Christians from the city.***

**• *Pray that the government will hold true to its promise to put a stop to the ongoing violence. Pray that it will be able to create an Iraqi state to which Iraqi Christians can return and where Christians and Muslims can live together peacefully.***

### □ CHINA – SON OF CHRISTIAN LEADER BEATEN UNCONSCIOUS

Zhang Jian, the elder son of Pastor “Bike” Zhang Mingxuan, President of the Chinese House Church Alliance, was brutally beaten by Public Security Bureau (PSB) officials while at home with his mother Xie Fenglan in Beijing. Around noon on 16 October fifteen PSB officers entered their home, shutting off all the exits, and beat Zhang Jian with iron bars for 25 minutes. His younger brother Zhang Chuang tried to help Zhang Jian, but he was beaten by the PSB officials as well. When Xie Fenglan tried to call an ambulance, the receptionist told her that she had orders from a higher government authority not to send anyone to help Zhang Jian because he was related to Pastor Bike Zhang. Finally Zhang Jian was taken to hospital by a friend of the family.

Zhang Jian has now regained consciousness, but the doctors fear that he might lose sight in his right eye, which was badly damaged during the beating. He left the hospital because PSB officials were watching him there and he feared for his safety. He is now staying with his brother. Soon after her son was taken to hospital, Xie Fenglan was told to leave her home, and the family’s furniture was thrown into the streets. Government authorities ordered all hotels in Beijing not to offer her a room. She is now staying with Dr Fan Yafeng, another house church leader in Beijing. Her husband Bike Zhang was arrested by PSB officials on 16 October and has been in detention since then. Previously, in July this year, Bike Zhang and his wife were forced from their home in Beijing and ended up living on the streets (see PFU August 08). During the past 22 years Bike Zhang has been arrested 26 times, and beaten or evicted from his home on several occasions.

Police also attempted to prevent Bike Zhang’s house church from meeting despite their having obtained official permission to do so on 28 September. On 10 October police sealed the door of the church and blocked the entrance with two truckloads of rubbish.

**• Pray for Bike Zhang's family, especially for Zhang Jian as he recovers from his injuries. Pray that God will restore his health and sight. Praise God for this family's steadfast trust in Him and their faithful service to Him and His people in China. Pray that He will uphold and protect them and give them the strength to carry on despite harassment, persecution and violence.**

**• Pray for Bike Zhang's church, that they will not be intimidated by the threats and pressure from the government officials. Pray that God will bring justice to His people in China and that the government will stop persecuting Christians. Pray that the international community will start to speak up for our Chinese brothers and sisters and that the Western Church will learn from their steadfastness and faith in the face of persecution.**

#### INDIA – CHRISTIANS FORCED TO CONVERT AS EXTREMISTS SEEK TO TURN ORISSA INTO A HINDU STATE

Hindu extremist violence against the Christian community in Orissa State, India, which started on 24 August (see PFU September & October 2008), has been continuing unabated for two months now. There have been numerous cases of forced conversions to Hinduism as Hindu extremists try to turn Orissa into a Hindu state. Christians who want to return to their homes are told by the Hindu extremists: "Come back as Hindu or don't come back at all." In some cases the Hindu extremists poured petrol over the Christians and then asked them to convert; if they refused they were burnt. Ashish Digal, a Christian leader, was told by the extremists that if he did not convert to Hinduism, they would burn his house and kill him. A young Hindu woman was gang-raped by her grandparents' neighbours because her uncle refused to renounce his Christian faith. Jaspina, a 32-year-old Christian woman, was warned by her neighbours, "If you go on being Christians, we will burn your houses and your children in front of you, so make up your minds quickly." She was forced to attend a conversion ceremony together with her husband and three children, during which they had to eat cow dung to "purify" themselves. Jaspina says: "I'm totally broken. I've always been a Christian. Inside I'm still praying for Jesus to give me peace and to take me out of this situation."

**• Pray for Christians in Orissa. Pray that the violence and forced conversions will stop and that God will bring His healing and peace to the many victims of the attacks. Pray that help will reach the affected Christians quickly.**

**• Pray that the international community will finally respond to what is happening in India and put pressure on the Indian government to take action and not allow the atrocities to continue.**

#### SOMALIA – CHRISTIAN CONVERT FROM ISLAM MURDERED AT WEDDING

A 22-year-old Somali Christian convert from Islam, Ahmadey Osman Nur, was murdered in September while attending a Muslim wedding. Since the wedding service was held in Arabic, which many of the guests did not understand, Nur asked for it to be translated into the Somali vernacular. Arabic is traditionally used in Muslim ceremonies because it is considered to be the "language Allah hears". The sheik who performed the ceremony took offence at Nur's request. Knowing of Nur's conversion to Christianity, he declared him to be guilty of apostasy and asked a guard to "silence" him. As Nur left, he was shot dead by an armed guard.

**• Pray for Nur's family and friends that they will know God's presence. Pray that the Lord will use Nur's death to bring many Somalis to Christ. Pray for all Christians in Somalia, especially for converts from Islam, who face much persecution and the very real possibility of being killed for their faith. Pray that the Lord will strengthen, encourage and protect them and that He will grow His Church in Somalia.**

#### UZBEKISTAN – CHURCH MEMBERS FINED AND IMPRISONED AS GOVERNMENT CONTINUES CRACKDOWN ON CHRISTIANS

Seven believers from a church in Tashkent were imprisoned for 15 days on 10 October for allegedly violating two articles of Uzbekistan's Administrative Code, including the Law on Religion. Five others were fined.

A couple from the church had gathered a few church members for prayer and thanksgiving in their home on 4 October. Yelena Kolesnikova and Aleksandr Kolesnikov were charged with "holding an illegal meeting without registering in the appropriate agencies". The court decision also stated that Yelena had taught religious doctrines without "special religious education". All those imprisoned were held in unheated cells without any water or toilet. They had to sleep on bare boards, and in the mornings and evenings a one and a half litre bottle of water was provided for each cell. The same kind of plastic bottle was given to them for urinating. The seven imprisoned Christians will be required to pay 15% of the cost of their own detention.

**• Pray for Yelena and Aleksandr and the other ten Christians who were fined or imprisoned on dubious charges. Pray that God will be close to them and that they will be supported and encouraged by their church community. Pray that the harassment by government officials will stop and that Christians will be allowed to meet and worship freely.**

#### ALGERIA – COURT DISMISSES CASE AGAINST THREE CHRISTIANS ACCUSED OF "BLASPHEMY"

The case against three Christian leaders accused of "blasphemy" was dismissed on 29 October by a court in Ain Turk, Algeria. The three Christians had been informed on 5 February that they had been sentenced in absentia to three years in prison and fines for "insulting Islam and its prophet" and "threatening" Mr Al-Aid, the man who brought charges against them. Mr Al-Aid had "converted" from Islam to Christianity for a period of time during which he also attended a Bible school. However he also maintained relations with radical Muslims. Later he "reconverted" to Islam and claimed that the three Christian leaders were blaspheming Islam and Muhammad. He also alleged that the Christians threatened him because he had returned to Islam. The three Christian leaders declined to bring charges against Mr Al-Aid for accusing them falsely, saying that they forgive him.

**• Praise God for this positive outcome of the court case and for the witness of the three Christian leaders in forgiving their accuser. Pray that the Algerian government and authorities will continue in this course of defending the freedom of religion Algeria has subscribed to. Pray that the situation of Algerian Christians will improve and that they will eventually be able to worship and meet together without government interference and harassment by local authorities.**

#### STOP PRESS: IRAN

Thank you very much for your prayers for two Iranian Christian converts, Mahmood Matin-Azad and Arash Basirat, who were arrested on 15 May and charged with apostasy from Islam. Praise God that the two men were released on 30 September. Please continue to pray for their safety. In the past some Christian converts who were imprisoned and then released have been killed after their release. Please pray also that the death penalty for apostasy will not become part of Iranian law.