

Prayer Focus 08/12

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“I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Matthew 5:44, NIV

Kenya - Deadly church attacks by Islamist militants

A coordinated attack on two churches in Kenya on 1 July by suspected al-Shabaab militants left at least 17 people dead and around 65 injured. The churches, which are 3km apart in Garissa, were targeted during their Sunday services at around 10.15am.

The first and most serious attack took place at the African Inland Church, where the gunmen shot dead two policemen who were guarding the building before throwing grenades inside. As the congregation tried to escape, the assailants opened fire on them; 15 members of the church were killed in the onslaught.

A Barnabas Fund contact in Kenya said, “The gun shots in the compound made worshippers run out in panic only to the waiting killers. Using police guns, they rained bullets on fleeing worshippers and many who could not run. Blood could be seen everywhere, furniture strewn all over and worshippers left in shock.”

Two grenades were thrown inside the second church; one failed to detonate, but three people were injured by the other.

- Pray that God will comfort the bereaved and heal the wounds of those injured during the attacks.
- Pray that all the plans of al-Shabaab will come to nothing and that the militants will repent of their actions.

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Vietnam - Thugs attack congregation; Christians take to the streets

A group of thugs, believed to have been paid by the authorities, brutally attacked a congregation in Vietnam as they gathered for a service on 1 July. The group beat ministers and members of the congregation in Nghe An province; dozens of people were injured. One woman suffered a fractured skull and was taken to hospital for treatment in intensive care. It is reported that the local authorities paid the assailants US\$25 “compensation” for their “work”.

Over the last 18 months the authorities in Nghe An province have deployed various tactics to try to stop Christians from attending services. Believers have endured mounting threats and persecution: police and security agents have threatened them, they have had stones thrown at them, and some have been arrested. But they have remained steadfast and have continued to gather for services.

In response to these attacks and harassments, more than 10,000 Christians took to the streets to take part in protest marches on 15 July. The protestors called for an end to persecution and anti-Christian propaganda in the state media, and respect for religious freedom.

On the eve of the marches, in a bid to deter Christians from taking part, the authorities deployed armoured vehicles outside a church leader’s residence, while police and hired thugs were sent to patrol the streets and make threats. The police also blocked the ferries to the meeting points for the marches, but this did not stop the Christians from reaching the appointed destinations; thousands set out the night before, walking for many miles, to get there on time.

In solidarity with the Christians in Nghe An province, believers in other parts of the country also held sit-ins and marches, carrying placards and banners displaying slogans such as “religious freedom is a right” and “we are determined to protect the Church”.

- Give thanks for the determination and bravery of Christians in Nghe An in coming together for services and to protest peacefully against injustice despite hindrances from the government. Pray for healing for all those hurt in the attacks.
- Pray that the authorities in Vietnam will cease using violence and other threatening tactics against Christians and will allow them to meet together in peace.

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Nigeria - Multiple attacks on Christians by Muslims in Plateau state

Over 65 people, including two politicians, were killed in early July in a triple attack by Muslims on a Christian farming community in Plateau state, Nigeria.

The first incident happened on 5 July when Muslims destroyed 43 Christian-owned farms. Nobody was arrested. This was followed up on 7 July with attacks on nine Christian villages around the city of Jos, in which dozens of people were killed. The next day, a funeral for the victims of the village raids was attacked by Muslims. Two Christian politicians in attendance, Gyang Dantong, the senator representing Plateau North, and Gyang Fulani, the majority leader of the state assembly, were shot dead. Several other people were also killed.

Then in mid-July, militant Islamist group Boko Haram launched attacks on twelve villages near Jos. Church members fled in panic and took refuge in the home of a local church leader. The house was bombed and more than 50 people were burnt alive, including the pastor's wife and children.

- Pray that those who lost loved ones will experience God's comfort while mourning, and that they will be given grace to forgive the killers.
- Pray for protection for Christians in Northern and central Nigeria, and that the Islamists there will turn away from violence.

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Iran - Christian converts: one released; one appeal denied

A convert from Islam to Christianity in Iran was released from prison on 16 June after spending eight months behind bars, including 105 days in solitary confinement. Eshan Behrooz, a 24-year-old student from Mashhad, endured tough mental and physical conditions and was deprived of basic rights that prisoners usually receive, such as being allowed to contact his family and talk to a lawyer.

He had first been arrested on 8 July 2010 with other new converts to Christianity. Eshan refused to sign a disclaimer renouncing his Christian faith, so he was held in custody. He was temporarily released three months later upon the payment of a US\$60,000 bail but was kept under surveillance, which caused both his physical and psychological health to suffer. On 23 October 2011, Eshan was arrested for a second time by the provincial security authorities, who transferred him to an unknown location. His family and friends did not know for some time that he had been re-arrested.

Meanwhile, a six-year prison sentence for an Iranian pastor, who was arrested as part of a major crackdown on the country's house church movement, has been upheld following an unsuccessful appeal hearing in June. Farshid Fathi Malayeri was originally sentenced on 5 March after several delays to his trial; at that point he had already been detained for 14 months, including over 100 days in solitary confinement. Farshid, a married father of two, will serve out his term in the notorious Evin Prison.

The pastor was convicted by a court in Tehran of being the chief agent of foreign organisations in Iran and of administering funds for foreign organisations. The political charges are apparently a pretext for locking up the pastor, a convert from Islam to Christianity, on account of his faith.

- Give thanks for the release of Christian convert Eshan Behrooz and pray that he will be able to resume his studies and be left in peace by the authorities.
- Ask the Lord to strengthen and sustain pastor Farshid Fathi Malayeri as he serves his time in prison. Pray that the guards and fellow prisoners will treat him well.
- Pray that the Iranian authorities will allow Christians to meet together for worship without harassment.

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Indonesia - Terrorist jailed and drop in support for Islamic political parties

A former "most wanted" terrorist in Indonesia, who made the explosives for blowing up several Indonesian churches as part of a major anti-Christian attack in 2000, received a 20-year prison sentence on 21 June. Umar Patek was found guilty of six charges including murder, bomb-making and terrorism offences in relation to the coordinated attacks on several churches in Jakarta on Christmas Eve in 2000 and also the Bali bombings that killed 202 people, mostly Western tourists, in 2002. The church attack was part of a major assault on 25 churches in eleven cities by militants by Islamist group Jemaah Islamiyah; around 19 people, mostly Christians attending services, were killed.

On 26 June the National Survey Institute reported a sharp drop in support for Islamic political parties in recent years. The number of people who backed the four main Islamic parties had gone down by 14% in three years, while their support has declined by 23% since 1998, when 38% of the population voted for one of these parties. This is a positive development for Christians in Indonesia, who have suffered extensive violence and harassment at the hands of Islamists, who want to eliminate Christianity and bring the entire country under sharia law. Since 2003 at least half of Indonesia's 32 provinces have added elements of versions of sharia to their legislation in response to Islamist pressure.

- Give thanks that support for Islamic political parties in Indonesia is waning, and pray that this change will be reflected in less violence against Christians.
- Give thanks that justice has been served through the jailing of Umar Patek, sending the message that Christian lives are of equal value with Muslim lives. Pray that he will repent of his wrongdoing and find Christ as his Saviour.

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Nepal - Extortion duo who threatened pastors detained by police

Police in Nepal have detained two members of an extortion racket who have been threatening to blow up pastors' churches and kill

their families if they fail to pay up.

Binod Kumar Tamang (29) of Kathmandu and Ramesh Pariyar (23) of Gorkha were caught in the act of extorting money from Sundar Thapa, chairman of the Federation of Nepali Christians and pastor of a church in Samakhusi. They had repeatedly threatened to blow up Sundar's church and kill his family if he did not pay the demanded sum of two million rupees (£14,500; US\$22,500; €18,200).

Tamang and Pariyar had issued bombing and kidnapping threats to other pastors in the Kathmandu Valley in their extortion campaign. Fearful that the threats would be carried out, the victims sought help from the police. Tamang and Pariyar have been charged with attempted kidnapping and extortion.

A Barnabas Fund partner in Nepal said that Christians face harassment in many forms, and expressed concern that the two detained men would be released. Outright violence against Christians in Nepal is rare, but there have been a few incidents in recent years: the Nepal Defence Army, an extremist Hindu group that wants to reinstate the country's Hindu monarchy, has detonated a bomb beside a Christian mission agency in Kathmandu, blown up a church in Lalitpur, killed a pastor and attacked other Christians.

- Give thanks that the police are investigating the extortion activities of these criminals against pastors in Nepal and pray that justice will be done.
- Ask the Lord to protect church leaders and Christian buildings in Nepal from harassment and attacks.

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