

A monthly resource for individuals and prayer groups
produced by Barnabas Aid

Number 195 - January 2013

For more information visit: www.barnabasaid.org



SYRIA

Plight of Christians intensifies

The condition of the Church in Syria is becoming more and more desperate. Christians, their property and their churches continue to be the targets of violent attack. A senior church leader reported that they also face "inflation, poverty, growing of sectarian enmity, shortages of supplies of food and fuel, cold weather, revenge, kidnapping for big amount of ransom, risks of traveling, frequent Internet cut off and many such things."

For example, while the Christian population of Homs was once 50,000-60,000, just 80 Christians remain in a Christian neighborhood of the old city in December 2012. They are being held hostage by rebels and prevented from leaving. One by one they are dying because of severe hardship and a lack of medicines. A Barnabas Aid partner stated that they were being kept there as "human shields" by Salafist rebel groups to deter government forces from attacking the Christian area, which is now occupied by rebels.

Despite the dangers they face, and the fact that many Syrian Christians have fled their homeland, church leaders in Syria have refused to leave their people. One senior Christian leader said, "We have to say we want to stay here. It is our vocation to give our testimony. We had a lot of persecution in the past and we have to find a way to continue." **Praise God** for the courage and steadfast witness of these leaders.

As observers predict the collapse of the Assad regime, under which Christians in Syria had been well treated, the future for Christians looks bleak. **Give thanks to the Lord** that He is a faithful God who does not desert His people in need. **Ask** that He will be a stronghold and a refuge for the 80 Christians left in Homs, and that they will be allowed to leave in safety. **Pray** that all Christians in Syria will know the Lord's peace in these desperate times, and that He will

make a way for them to live in safety in their own country.

NIGERIA

Christians targeted in bombing and riots

Cry out to the Lord on behalf of Christians in Nigeria, who continue to be the target of violent attacks by Islamists. More Christians have lost their lives in two recent incidents in predominantly Muslim Northern states.

In the first incident, on November 25, at least eleven people were killed when suicide bombers attacked a church inside a military barracks in Jaji, Kaduna state. Initially, a bus was driven into the wall of St. Andrew's Protestant Church. This blast caused no casualties, but as worshippers gathered around the scene there was a deadly second explosion when a car was blown up outside the church. Although officials reported a death toll of eleven people, with 30 injured, witnesses at the scene put the number of dead at around 50. The Islamist group Boko Haram is thought to be behind the attack; a recent report estimated that the group has been responsible for over 3,000 deaths since 2009.

Three days earlier, in the town of Bichi in nearby Kano state, an allegation of blasphemy led to anti-Christian riots. Chibuke, a Christian tailor, accidentally mispronounced the name of a popular outfit, inadvertently saying, "The prophet has come to the market." He was subsequently accused of deliberately blaspheming against Islam, and rampaging Muslims took a violent revenge; a mob armed with cutlasses, knives and other weapons attacked Christians and their property. Four deaths, including that of Chibuke, were reported, although only two have been officially confirmed.

Pray for those who are mourning loved ones lost in these atrocities. **Ask** that the Lord will comfort them and enable them to forgive the perpetrators. **Pray** that He will be

a shield around His people in Nigeria, who are at great risk of violence at the hands of Islamists, and that they will know His peace despite the dangers they face.

UZBEKISTAN

Jailed pastor released and granted asylum in Sweden

Give thanks to the Lord that Makset Djabbarbergenov, a pastor from Uzbekistan who was imprisoned in Kazakhstan and facing extradition back to his homeland, has been freed from prison and granted asylum in Sweden along with his family.

Makset and his family had fled to Kazakhstan because of continued harassment by the secret police in Uzbekistan. He is wanted in his homeland for violating the country's restrictive religion law, and had been detained, for the second time since he arrived in Kazakhstan, since September 2012. The original detention request made by the authorities refers to two separate offenses, neither of which carries a penalty of more than three years in prison. However, one of the charges was later changed to that of "creation, leadership or participation in religious extremist, separatist, fundamentalist or other banned organizations", an offense that is punishable by up to 15 years in prison in Uzbekistan.

Barnabas Aid raised Makset's plight with the authorities in the UK, Europe and the US, and also petitioned the Kazakh authorities. On December 4, he was released from prison in Almaty and taken to the airport, where he was reunited with his pregnant wife and four sons. They were issued with visas for Sweden before being flown to the country. **Praise God** that He hears the needy and does not despise His own people who are prisoners (Psalm 69:33). **Give thanks** that Makset is now safe from being imprisoned for his faith, and pray for the release of others who are in jail around the world because they are followers of Christ.

VIETNAM

Christians fear surge in incidents of harassment following increased restrictions

Christians in Vietnam, who already endure severe restrictions on their activities, are now facing the prospect of even tighter control. Churches are already required to register with the government, and those that do not register or are refused registration are subject to a great deal of harassment. New restrictions, which come into force on January 1 2013, will make it even harder for churches to register.

Religious groups will now have to prove that they have operated for 20 years without violating any law, including "infringing national security". However, because this charge is often leveled at groups that the government wants to suppress, it is feared that the new conditions will allow the government to refuse registration to more churches. The decree also requires that religious leaders obtain the permission of the authorities before they can travel abroad for conferences.

Disturbingly, a senior member of the Vietnamese Parliament said recently that "Vietnam will increasingly model itself on China in matters of religious policies". Christians in China who are members of unregistered house churches often suffer intense harassment, including the possibility of jail terms.

Lift up to the Lord our Christian brothers and sisters in Vietnam, and **ask** that they will be protected from harassment resulting from these tightened restrictions. **Pray** that the Lord who gives strength to His people and blesses them with peace (Psalm 29:11) will be with the congregations of churches that are unable to register. **Pray** also that the government will not continue to make its policies on religious freedom more repressive.

BELARUS

Beleaguered church given last-minute election reprieve

Give thanks that a church in Belarus that has been locked in a ten-year battle with the authorities has narrowly escaped being forced to vacate its premises. New Life Pentecostal Church, which meets in a renovated cowshed on the outskirts of Minsk because it is barred from using public buildings, was ordered to leave on November 27. **Praise the Lord** that on December 5 it received a last-minute reprieve from forced eviction.

In Belarus, state permission is required in advance for a building to be used for religious activities. Protestant groups are often refused this permission, and so face state harassment for continuing to meet. New Life, which has a congregation of around 1,000, has been the target of several official attempts to force them out. The church has been issued with numerous heavy fines, and in 2004 the building's power supply was cut off by the authorities. When the building was formally confiscated in 2006 and a bulldozer sent to demolish it, New Life launched a hunger strike that attracted high-profile support, and the authorities backed down. The church's bank account was also frozen in 2010, making it very difficult for it to carry out its work.

The church held a thanksgiving service for this latest escape from eviction, but a spokesperson acknowledged that this reprieve is unlikely to be the end of the harassment the congregation faces. Church administrator Vitaly Antonchikov said, "This isn't the end, of course – the eviction is canceled, but legally our land and building still belong to the authorities." **Pray** that the official campaign against New Life church will be stopped, and that it will be able to worship in peace. **Ask** that every member of the congregation will know the Lord's peace and strength throughout any future trials.

INDONESIA

Christians at risk from violence and sharia law

A recent announcement from the new mayor of a city in Indonesia that sharia law will be implemented there is set to make the position of Christians even more vulnerable. Budi Setiawan, mayor of Tasikmalaya in West Java, made the promise on November 19 in order to honor a pledge he made to Muslim leaders who backed his election campaign.

Christians in Indonesia face both the prospect of attack by Islamists and the challenge of official intolerance. Two churches in West Java have been closed by the authorities, and both have also come under attack from extremist groups. In some provinces aspects of sharia law are applied to Christians as well as to Muslims, and non-Muslims are seen as second-class citizens under sharia. The mayor's plans have met with opposition; **pray** that they will not be carried out.

This announcement came after a UN spokesperson slammed Indonesia's record on protecting minority groups. Navi Pillay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, spoke out against "violent attacks, forced

displacement, denial of identification cards and other forms of discrimination and harassment" against Christians and other religious minorities. She called on Indonesia to take "firm action" to reduce the number of such incidents. **Pray** that Ms. Pillay's public statement will lead to reduced anti-Christian persecution in Indonesia.

Ask also that the Lord will strengthen Christian communities who face opposition. **Give thanks** that police pledged to tighten security at registered churches throughout the country over Christmas and New Year, and **ask** that the Lord will keep His people in Indonesia and other Muslim-majority countries safe throughout this high-risk period, when there are often attacks on Christians.

INDIA

Poorest Christians still denied economic rights

Millions of disadvantaged Indian Christians continue to be denied their constitutional rights by the government. Christian Dalits are refused the socio-economic benefits that are given to their Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist counterparts. Because Dalits are at the very bottom of India's hierarchical caste system, they are greatly disadvantaged, and legislation exists to redress this imbalance by bolstering their rights. Christian and Muslim Dalits, however, are denied these provisions, known as Scheduled Caste status.

Pray for Christian Dalits, who have long been protesting their unequal status, most recently on November 15 in New Delhi. **Ask** that this continued pressure will lead to Scheduled Caste status also being extended to Christian and Muslim Dalits. Tribal Christians, who can also remain trapped in poverty without official recognition, are similarly denied it. Even the non-Christian relatives of tribal Christians can be denied the caste certificate they need to access support such as scholarships for their children.

Lift up to the Lord Indian Christians who are trapped in grinding poverty, and **ask** that He will meet all their needs according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19). **Ask** that they will also know His joy despite the struggles they face.

Would you prefer your copy of Prayer Focus Update in large print? Do you know somebody else who would? Please contact your Barnabas Aid national office to order this resource in large print.

"And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it" (John 14:13-14, NIV).

- USA: 6731 Curran Street, McLean, VA 22101. Email usa@barnabasaid.org
- UK: 9 Priory Row, Coventry, CV1 5EX. Email info@barnabasfund.org
- Australia: PO Box 3527, Loganholme, QLD 4129. Email bfaustralia@barnabasfund.org
- New Zealand: PO Box 27 6018, Manukau City, Auckland 2241. Email office@barnabasfund.org.nz