



Syria – Christians go into hiding as Turkish forces and Syrian rebels seize Afrin

Christian families in the northern Syrian town of Afrin went into hiding on 18 March, as Turkish forces and Syrian rebels seized the town.

Villages in the region were reportedly “cleared” of Christians and other religious minorities as Turkish armed forces and Syrian rebels (some of whom are understood to be militant jihadists) advanced to seize control of Afrin from Kurdish militia. A Christian aid worker stated, “There have been announcements made that, if you kill Christians, you will go straight to paradise.” Christian activists report “war crimes and ethnic cleansing” are taking place, while graphic videos have emerged online showing the bodies of men, women and children strewn across the street. One UN Goodwill Ambassador said the situation was “reminiscent of the initial actions of ISIS in Iraq” and “foreshadows ethnic cleansing and genocide”.

Turkey is attempting to wrest control of the region from Kurdish security forces. Instead of protecting Christians, Kurdish militia have been known to kidnap them to serve as conscripts to fight against the Turkish army (see March 2018 PFU).

Intercede for Christians trapped in Afrin; ask the Lord Most High to save and deliver them, as they take refuge in Him (Psalm 7). Pray that Afrin’s water

supply will be restored – it was cut off by the Turkish army several weeks ago – and that the plans of jihadists to eradicate the Christian presence in the region will be thwarted.

Egypt – government gives legality to 53 churches

A special committee set up to review church registration applications legalised the status of 53 Egyptian churches and related buildings on 26 February.

In 2016, the Egyptian Parliament voted to abolish Ottoman-era restrictions on church building. But the committee set up to review applications from the many pre-existing churches did not meet until October 2017 – previous restrictions made registration so difficult that many congregations had no option but to worship illegally in unlicensed buildings.

Praise God for answered prayer, as the Egyptian government has acted on the pledge to legalise Christian places of worship, and give thanks that in January 2018 the government announced that Christians would be allowed to hold meetings in unlicensed buildings, pending their formal recognition as places of worship. Pray that legality will also be granted to the thousands more churches which still await registration, and that in the longer term the law will be changed so that Egyptian Christians can meet to worship freely without the need to register.

Tajikistan – Pastor calls for prayer after church raid

The pastor of a church in Tajikistan has called for prayer after secret police raided a church worship service on Sunday 11 March 2018.

Police took photographs and filmed the congregation. They also attempted to search church ministry offices, without the permission or presence of the church leaders, and confiscated a piece of Christian literature. After the service, the police questioned the two church leaders at length before leaving. The pastors of the church have already been given two warnings and fined. If a third fine and warning are issued, the church faces the possibility of being shut down.

The import and distribution of religious literature has to be approved by authorities in Tajikistan and similar confiscations have led to Christians being imprisoned. In July 2017, Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov, a 42-year-old father of three, was jailed for three years after police confiscated “subversive” hymnbooks from his church (see September 2017 PFU).

The pastor of the church raided on 11 March writes: **“Please pray** for this situation: that the Lord gives us the opportunity to continue to freely testify about our faith in Jesus Christ; that we have the opportunity to have the necessary Christian literature for self-education and for testimony; that the Lord will not allow them to close our church.”

Sudan – church pastor murdered with family for preaching the Gospel

Masked attackers murdered a church pastor in Darfur, western Sudan, along with his wife and two daughters in the early hours of 2 March 2018.

The six attackers forced their way into Pastor Stephen Toms Abur's house shortly after 1 a.m., assembled the family in the living room and demanded Pastor Stephen explain why he had not heeded their warnings to stop preaching. In response, Pastor Stephen started telling them about Jesus. They then beat him up and tried to force him to violate his daughters, Rachel and Priscilla. He refused. "They then began by killing the girls first, then their mother [Beatrice], and finally the pastor himself. They were cut in pieces as though they were cows." As Stephen, tied up, watched the brutal murder of his family, he sang "Hallelujah Hosanna", a song loved in the churches of Darfur. A young boy who worked for the family – who only escaped death by hiding in the ceiling of the house – witnessed the murders.

After killing Pastor Stephen and his family, the attackers set fire to the church, where hundreds of Christian converts were sleeping; they have been disowned by their Muslim families and have nowhere else to go. Although some were seriously hurt, none died, which Barnabas Fund's contact describes as a moment of divine intervention.

Pray for the family and congregation of Stephen, Beatrice, Rachel and Priscilla. Ask that they will be comforted in their time of loss, but also encouraged by the assurance that, having persevered under trial and stood the test, Pastor Stephen and his family have received the crown of life

the Lord has promised to those who love Him (James 1:12). Give thanks that none of the Christian converts from Islam sheltering in the church building were killed in the fire, but pray for those who were injured, especially 28 who are still in hospital at the time of writing.

Philippines - Islamists plotting another Marawi

The Islamist group linked to Islamic State, which murdered Christians and destroyed churches when it seized Marawi city on the southern island of Mindanao in May 2017, is "regrouping, retraining and recruiting for another attack", a Philippines' army spokesman told journalists on 5 March 2018.

Marawi was only retaken after a five-month siege, during which Christians were singled out. Some were murdered, while others were abducted, forced to make bombs and used as human shields, while Christian women were kept as sex slaves. Amnesty International later reported that nearly all the civilians murdered by Islamic militants during the siege of Marawi were Christians.

Islamist rebel groups on Mindanao have been engaged in a long-running struggle against the government. In 2014, the government agreed a peace deal with rebels which created a semi-independent Muslim region on Mindanao, but Christian villages continued to be targeted by militants, even before the capture of Marawi.

Uphold in prayer our Christian brothers and sisters in the southern Philippines. Pray for complete healing for the physical and psychological scars that remain after the Marawi siege and ask that they will know the Lord as their rock and refuge in the face of evil (2 Samuel 22:3).

Nigeria – Boko Haram free kidnapped Muslim schoolgirls, but keep Christian captive

Boko Haram militants freed the rest of a group of kidnapped schoolgirls on 21 March, but are still holding captive a Christian girl who refused to convert to Islam.

The girls were abducted on 19 February 2018 from a government Science and Technical Secondary School (High School) in the town of Daptchi in north-east Nigeria. Around 70 were returned to Daptchi in the early hours of 21 March. "I don't know why they brought us back but they said because we are children of Muslims. One [girl] is still with them because she is a Christian," one of the released girls told journalists. The Christian girl is understood to be 15-year-old Leah Sherubu. Her father has praised her faithfulness, stating, "I am grateful to God that my daughter refused to convert."

Boko Haram have previously conducted targeted abductions of schoolchildren, including in Chibok in April 2014. Although many of the "Chibok girls" have been released, over 100 are still thought to be held by Boko Haram. Those who were released stated that during their captivity they were forcibly converted to Islam and married to Islamist militants.

Join hands with our Nigerian brothers and sisters to call on the Lord for protection for Leah. Pray for her swift release and that, despite her terrifying circumstances, she will know that nothing can separate her from the love of Christ (Romans 8:35). Pray also for the parents of the Chibok girls still held in captivity, especially as the fourth anniversary of their abduction falls on 14 April.

**Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.**

(1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

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