



## Syria – Eight wounded in car bombing outside church in north-eastern city and woman stoned to death after rape and torture ordeal near Idlib

At least eight people were injured outside a church in a car bomb blast on 11 July in Qamishli. Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for the attack in the north-eastern city, which is currently held by the Kurdish YPG militia.

Earlier the same day, a bomb had killed eleven civilians, including children, in Afrin, just north of Aleppo and on the border with Turkey. A number of others were wounded, some seriously, in the blast that shook a residential area. Many homes were damaged in the explosion and subsequent fire.

A few days earlier, on 8 July, retired Christian school teacher Suzan Der Kirkour went missing from her home in the mainly-Christian village of Al-Yacoubia in the Idlib governorate. The 60-year-old woman's body was found the next day in a grove near her home by members of her church.

Suzan had been raped repeatedly, tortured and stoned to death by Islamist militants linked to an Al-Nusra Front rebel group in the area. Forensic investigation found that the barbaric ordeal was prolonged, lasting for around nine hours, before her murder.

A Christian leader in the region asked for prayer and said, "Attacks against Christians, mainly women and girls, are frequent here now, but this one has shocked the community. Suzan was an unmarried lady and a respected teacher who only remained in the village for the sake of her pupils, so that they could continue their studies." He added, "She was well known in her church and was the teacher of many in the village."

**Pray** that the LORD will be a strong tower of protection (Proverbs 18:10) for our Christian brothers and sisters in Syria, especially women and girls. Ask that all who were injured in the explosions in Qamishli and Afrin will

know His healing and those made homeless will find refuge. Pray that those who have lost loved ones will be comforted and that there will be no escalation of violence on the streets. Ask the Lord also to sustain Suzan's relatives, pupils, and her wider Christian family in her village as they come to terms with her appalling murder. Ask that Suzan's martyrdom will unite the community to stand firm in their faith and that those who carry out such atrocities will realise that their actions are displeasing to the living God (1 Thessalonians 2:15).

## Iran – Christians barred from entering church in Tabriz "encouraged" as cross put back on building, family group among eight Christians arrested in Bushehr

Prayers were answered when a cross, forcibly removed from the top of a 100-year-old Assyrian church in Tabriz, was restored to its rightful place by authorities on 9 July. The congregation were "encouraged" to see it reinstated, but they are still locked out of the building.

Security agents tore the cross from the evangelical church on 9 May. They also changed the locks, installed monitoring equipment and barred Assyrian Christians from worshipping there.

Christians worldwide were urged in June by a pastor to send letters to Iranian embassies in a "strong wave of protest" over the church sealing. It had been officially seized by a court order in 2011 but worshippers had been allowed to continue using the building.

Assyrian MP, Yonathan Betkolia, wrote to President Rouhani calling on the Iranian parliament to reopen the church and restore the cross. He asked, "Is this action befitting the dignity of the Islamic Republic of Iran, to treat the sacred places of Christians in such a way?"

In June, a senior legal adviser to the Iranian president, Aliakbar Gorji Azandaryani, said he had "serious doubts about the legality", referring to

Iran's Constitution, particularly Article 13 which states that religious minorities are recognised and free to perform their religious ceremonies. He added that the move also went against Iran's Charter of Citizens' Rights, launched by Rouhani in 2016.

In the south-west city of Bushehr eight Iranian converts to Christianity, including five from one family, were arrested at their homes in coordinated raids carried out by Ministry of Intelligence agents on 1 July.

The officials seized Bibles, laptops, phones and identity and bank cards. Agents also searched the workplaces of at least two of the Christians, taking computer hard drives and security camera footage.

Sources named the five family members arrested as Sam Khosravi, 36, Maryam Falahi, 35, Sasan Khosravi, 35, Marjan Falahi, 33, and Khatoon Fatolahzadeh, 61. The other Christians were named as Pooriya Peyma, 27, Fatemeh Talebi, 27, and Habib Heydari, 38.

Agents arrived in six cars when they came to arrest Khatoon Fatolahzadeh, who was released later the same day because of her age. The others are being held in solitary confinement without access to lawyers at the Ministry of Intelligence office in Bushehr.

**Praise the Lord** who hears the prayers of His worshippers (John 9:31) that the Iranian authorities have restored the cross to the Assyrian church in Tabriz. Pray that they will completely reverse their actions by reopening the building and allowing the congregation to resume their worship. Thank Him for those who spoke out against the authorities' actions. Pray that the seven Iranian Christians will wear the full armour of God (Ephesians 6:10-17) as they endure the trial of solitary confinement in prison. Thank God for Khatoon's release and pray that she will recover from the ordeal of her arrest. Ask that all Christian converts around the world, who are so vulnerable to

discrimination and persecution, will know God as their ever-present help (Psalm 46:1) and receive the strength to hold fast in their faith.

## Pakistan – Eight Christian prisoners of conscience still on death row

At least eight Christians remain on death row in Pakistan after being convicted under the Islamic law of “blasphemy”.

The current prisoners under death sentences include brothers Qaisar and Amoon Ayub who were sentenced in December 2018 and are waiting for an appeal hearing date. Prisoners with High Court appeals pending include Anwar Kenneth, Sawan Masih, brothers Anjum and Javed Naaz and Shafqat Emmanuel Masih and his wife, Shagufta Kausar. Zafar Bhatti, who has a sentence of life imprisonment, also awaits an appeal hearing date.

No Christians (or followers of any other religion) have been executed for “blasphemy” despite the mandatory death sentence for “defiling the name of” Muhammad, but many of them have been languishing in prison for years, according to statistics provided by CLAAS (Centre for Legal Aid, Assistance and Settlement), which is supported by Barnabas Fund.

Christian mother-of-five Aasia Bibi was released after spending eight years on death row when the Supreme Court acquitted her on 31 October 2018. It remains uncertain if her release was a “landmark ruling” that will improve the plight of Pakistan’s Christian minority – around 2% of the population, or about 4 million.

The court freed Aasia Bibi because of flimsy and contradictory evidence, while simultaneously confirming that those who break the “blasphemy” law should be punished.

On 1 May 2019, police declared a Christian man called Farhan Aziz innocent of “blasphemy” and released him after nine months in custody (mentioned in June *Prayer Focus*). At the time of Farhan’s arrest, an angry mob armed with steel rods and petrol cans congregated in a Christian area of Gujranwala, but police intervened to

prevent an attack on Christians’ homes.

**Ask** the Lord to uphold our brothers and sisters on death row in Pakistan on “blasphemy” charges and those facing life imprisonment. Pray that they will hold fast to the everlasting Rock (Isaiah 26:4) as they endure confinement and hostility. Pray that “blasphemy” prisoners of all religions will be justly released and kept safe from attack. Ask that the lawyers representing them will be protected and granted wisdom as they work on the appeal cases. Pray that the judges will have the compassion, impartiality and courage to acquit them.

## Mali – Jihadists wipe out Christian village killing at least 100 with many burnt to death

At least 100 men, women and children were slaughtered in the Mopti region of central Mali on 10 June when heavily-armed jihadists descended on the mainly-Christian village of Sobame Da.

The jihadists encircled the isolated village of ethnic Dogon people at night, opened fire and razed homes in a “well-targeted attack”, said a Barnabas Fund contact.

In what he described as the “worst massacre in Mali since 1946” the villagers were either shot or burned to death in their homes, with just a few of the men managing to survive.

The exact death toll could be as high as 135, but is difficult to establish because of the extreme charring of some of the bodies.

A survivor said, “About 50 heavily armed men arrived on motorbikes and pickups. They first surrounded the village and then attacked ... anyone who tried to escape was killed. No-one was spared.”

The contact added that, since 2018, there have been several Christians killed or abducted in north and central Mali. Many others have been forced to flee from their villages, abandoning their homes and livelihoods, to safer regions of the country. Others opt to stay in their homes, but dare not go out, to work their fields or tend animals, for fear of being killed.

**Call on the Lord** to bring comfort and peace to the few surviving men of the massacre in Mali who mourn the

terrible loss of their entire families and their community. Pray that Christian communities in the areas under threat from jihadists will not be dismayed but know that no matter what horrors they face in this world, a crown of eternal peace and life (James 1:12) awaits them as the heavenly reward for their faith. The jihadists have announced their intention of establishing sharia (Islamic law) throughout Mali. Ask the LORD to thwart and bring to nothing the plans of these men of violence and destruction (Psalm 112:10).

## Nigeria – Judge sides with Christians to block Kaduna State from screening and licensing pastors

A Muslim Nigerian judge sided with a Christian group on 19 June and told the Kaduna State government it has no right to screen and license pastors.

Justice Hajara Gwadah said it was an “affront to this honourable court” that Kaduna State Governor Nasir El-Rufai’s administration had attempted to push through the law, knowing court proceedings, brought by a Christian denomination, were imminent.

The judge added that while the northern state had the power to regulate religious activities, the plan to vet and license pastors was a gross violation of fundamental human rights, inconsistent with the Nigerian Constitution.

John Hayab, state chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria, called on the governor to obey the court ruling. “If God can turn the hand of the pharaoh of Egypt, we believe that God can touch the heart of the governor,” he said.

**Praise God** that Justice Gwadah bought to a halt the illegal plans of the Kaduna authorities to screen and license pastors. Pray that pastors will have the courage to persevere in preaching and that many will believe through hearing (Romans 10:17) the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in that land. Ask that God will soften the hearts of authorities toward Christians and intercede for security forces as they attempt to recapture territories from the grip of Boko Haram in the north.

**And they remembered that God was their rock, and the high God their redeemer - Psalm 78:35 (KJV)**

- UK: 9 Priory Row, Coventry, CV1 5EX. Email [info@barnabasfund.org](mailto:info@barnabasfund.org)
- Australia: PO Box 3527, Loganholme, QLD 4129. Email [bfaustralia@barnabasfund.org](mailto:bfaustralia@barnabasfund.org)
- New Zealand: PO Box 27 6018, Manukau City, Auckland 2241. Email [office@barnabasfund.org.nz](mailto:office@barnabasfund.org.nz)
- Northern Ireland: Office 113 Russell, Business Centre 40-42 Lisburn Road, Belfast, BT9 6AA. Please send post to our UK office address.
- South Africa: Office 301, 3rd Floor, Eikestad mall, 43 Andringa Street, Stellenbosch 7599. Email [bfsa@barnabasfund.org](mailto:bfsa@barnabasfund.org)