



## Nigeria – gunmen abduct 39 students from college in Kaduna; kidnapped pastor is freed by Boko Haram

Gunmen abducted 39 students, most of whom are Christians, from the Federal College of Forestry Mechanisation in Mando, Kaduna State, Nigeria on 11 March.

The armed gang raided the college at about 9.30 p.m., shooting indiscriminately and rounding up 219 people. Of these, 180 were rescued by the army soon afterwards.

Several videos have been released showing the 39 students who remain in captivity being threatened, beaten and whipped.

In another video, a male student being held at gunpoint pleads with the government to intervene.

The student, whose surname was given as Emmanuel, added, “Many of us here have been injured – badly injured. Time is going ... most of us here are having health issues.”

In separate development, a pastor kidnapped by Boko Haram on Christmas Eve 2020 was released on 3 March, the day the Islamist terror group said they would execute him.

The release of Pastor Bulus Yakuru was negotiated by the Nigerian government’s Department of State Services and a Nigerian charity.

On 24 February, Boko Haram released a video in which Pastor Bulus said that his captors had given him an ultimatum threatening to kill him a week from that date.

The militants snatched the pastor on 24 December 2020, during a raid on the predominantly Christian village of Pemi, about 20 km from Chibok, in which eleven people were killed. The gunmen went on to murder five Christians abducted in the region as a so-called “Christmas present”.

In Nigeria’s Kogi State, a pastor was beaten unconscious by around 20 youths on 1 March after refusing to allow them to conduct a traditional African religious ceremony in a church building.

Pastor Michael Samson of the United Evangelical Church in the Ibaji area was asleep in his bed when the gang entered and attacked him.

Earlier that day, Pastor Michael prevented the young men from using the church building to hold a non-Christian ceremony called a “Masquerade”, a Nigerian animistic religious ceremony in which worshippers of a particular deity perform rituals linked to the seasons of the year.

**Give thanks** for answered prayer that resulted in the safe release of Pastor Bulus, and lift up in prayer the 39 kidnapped students. Ask for the students’ protection and pray that they will be strong and take heart as they continue to hope in the LORD (Psalm 31:24). Pray for the full recovery of Pastor Michael who, at the time of writing, was in a critical condition in hospital. Ask that Pastor Bulus recovers physically and spiritually from his ordeal.

## Saudi Arabia – convert to Christianity faces court cases and threats of violence

A Christian convert from Islam in Saudi Arabia has faced two court cases as well as threats of violence against him and his family.

The convert, named only as “A”, appeared in court on 11 March 2021 on charges of trying to convert Muslims. The charges arose from a conversation in a restaurant in 2020, in which he allegedly discussed his own conversion to Christianity.

The second court case was due to be held on 26 March and concerned alleged financial misconduct relating to assistance “A” gave his sister, also a

convert to Christianity, for her and her children to flee Saudi Arabia.

The sister’s husband threatened violence against the wife and son of “A”, who may be vulnerable to attack should “A” be imprisoned.

“A” has already spent time in prison and suffered flogging for his faith in Christ and for helping his sister leave the country.

In Saudi Arabia, it is a capital offence for a Muslim to leave their Islamic religion, as specified in sharia (Islamic law). No Saudi Christian convert from Islam is known to have been executed in recent times, but some have been murdered by their families. The number of Saudi nationals who are Christians is unknown, and even for foreigners it is not safe to be openly Christian because it is illegal to manifest any religion publicly except Islam.

**Praise the Lord** for the perseverance and courage of His faithful servant in the face of flogging and imprisonment (Romans 12:12). Pray that God will shield and protect his wife and son from attack, and that their needs will be met. Ask that the Saudi authorities will lose interest in “A” and allow him to live out his Christian faith without further harassment. Pray that though hard pressed on every side, Christians in Saudi will not be crushed, though perplexed they will not despair, though persecuted they will never feel abandoned (2 Corinthians 4:8-9).

## Ethiopia – militants massacre 24 Christians including two ministers

Twenty-four Christians, including two ministers, were attacked and killed by armed militants in western Ethiopia on Sunday 7 March.

The Christians were attending a church service in Horo Guduru, Welega zone (formerly Welega Province).

According to local contacts, members of the militant group OLF Shene, an offshoot of the Oromo Liberation Front thought to be active in west and south Oromia, surrounded the church and forced members of the congregation to hand over their mobile phones.

The armed men then killed the two ministers outside the church, before taking the other Christians to a nearby forest where they too were killed.

“Please include Ethiopia in your prayers,” urged a Barnabas Fund contact who told us that Christians in the region are living under an ongoing threat of violent attack. “... Christians are living in utter fear day in and day out,” he added.

**Bring before** the Lord His beloved children in Ethiopia, praying that they be comforted in the knowledge that whoever believes in Jesus Christ will live even though they die (John 11:25-26). Pray for the Lord’s protection over His people as they gather in His Name. Ask that the militants, seeing that God is with the Christians and will never leave nor forsake them, will have their eyes opened to the love and power of God (Deuteronomy 31:8).

## Pakistan – new interreligious aide to Imran Khan says minorities “not second class citizens”

The Pakistani government has renewed a commitment to protect minorities and promote religious tolerance with the appointment of a special aide to advise Prime Minister Imran Khan on interreligious matters.

Hafiz Muhammad Tahir Mahmood Ashrafi, a respected Muslim scholar and Chairman of the Pakistan Ulema Council (PUC), was named Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Religious Harmony and Middle East.

His appointment came as the government acknowledged a need to restrain the abuse of “blasphemy” laws and protect all victims of false accusation, as well as Christians and other religious minorities from forced marriage to Muslims and forced conversions.

After his appointment was announced,

Hafiz Ashrafi affirmed that minorities living in Pakistan are “not second-class citizens” and guaranteed that they will be protected under the rights and privileges enshrined in the constitution of Pakistan. According to sharia, non-Muslims living under Islam should not have the same rights and freedoms as the Muslim population and are of less value.

Christians are often despised by the majority-Muslim population in Pakistan and referred to as “sweepers” or Chuhra as a term of derision. Most Christians today in Pakistan are confined to low-paid menial jobs such as street sweeping and latrine cleaning.

Hafiz Ashrafi has already set up a grievance helpline to resolve complaints of false “blasphemy” accusations or any threats made on religious grounds.

Pakistan’s notorious “blasphemy” laws are often used to make false accusations in order to settle personal grudges. Christians are especially vulnerable, as merely stating certain Christian beliefs can be construed as “blasphemy”.

Among Hafiz Ashrafi’s first tasks was the appointment of a network of Religious Harmony Council Conveners across the country who will work at a local level to promote tolerance between all religious groups.

**Give thanks** for this initiative by Pakistan’s leadership and pray that it will change the attitudes of many Muslims in Pakistan so that they view Christians as equals instead of despising them. Pray that God will guide Hafiz Ashrafi as he sets about his task of promoting religious tolerance. Praise the Lord for the faith of Pakistani Christians and ask that they persevere in their trials, exulting in the hope of the glory of God (Romans 5:1-6).

## China – government’s tight new regulations for ministry include database of church leaders

New government measures, which will include a database of church leaders, look set to introduce even more state control over Christian ministry in China.

The Measures for the Administration

of Religious Personnel issued by the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), first announced in November 2020, will come into effect on 1 May 2021.

Key among the new measures is the creation by SARA of “a database of religious personnel” listing all those authorised by the state to perform religious ministry. Church leaders not registered in this database will not be permitted to undertake ministry.

In order to be registered, church leaders must be those who “love the motherland, support the leadership of the Communist Party of China, support the socialist system, abide by the constitution, laws, regulations and rules, [and] practice the core values of socialism”.

The database will include “the basic information of religious personnel” and each pastor, or other religious leader, added will be given an identification number.

The new rules obligate churches and religious organisations to conduct formal assessments of their pastors. The churches must use this assessment to apply “rewards and punishments”, which will also be recorded in the database.

Religious organisations, including churches, will be obliged to cancel the qualifications of a minister if they are “advised” to do so by SARA.

Religious leaders or organisations that do not adhere to the regulations in a manner satisfactory to SARA may be liable to penalties including de-registration, fines, or criminal prosecution.

**Join with** our Christian brothers and sisters in China as they pray for these stringent rules to be lifted, remembering that Jesus said, “Everything is possible for one who believes” (Mark 9:23). Ask that the Lord will frustrate the schemes of communist party officials who seek to curtail His growing Church in China. May believers take heart in the words of their Saviour, “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” (Matthew 16:18)

**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.**

*Galatians 5:22-23*

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