

Barnabas Prayer Focus

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hope and aid for the persecuted church

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Pakistan – Man acquitted of “blasphemy”, three others charged without evidence and young Christian girl raped by robbers saves sister from assault

A Christian man, Imran Ghafur, imprisoned for life on the charge of “blasphemy”, was acquitted by the Lahore High Court, on 15 December, more than eleven years after his initial arrest.

Imran was sentenced to life in prison and a fine of 100,000 rupees (£460; \$620; €510) for allegedly burning part of the Quran while cleaning his bookshop in Hajwari, Faisalabad. Before his arrest, in 2009, an angry mob of around 400 Muslims beat him outside his home.

A similar accusation was made against three Pakistani Christian men in Punjab province, accused on Christmas Day 2020 of “blasphemy” for allegedly having burnt pages of the Quran.

Police arrived in the village of Kotli Muhammad Sadique, near Narowal city, as Christians were preparing to leave church following a Christmas service. A mob of Muslims from surrounding villages later gathered demanding the arrest of Azeem Mehmood, Irfan Saleem and Abbas Gulshan. Azeem was arrested that night and jailed the following day, while the other two were advised to surrender themselves to the police to safeguard the entire Christian community in the village from mob attack. All three were later freed on bail.

The men were charged under section 295-A of Pakistan’s Penal Code, punishable with a fine or two years’

imprisonment. Lawyers say that police have the authority at any point to add a charge under 295-B, which has a penalty of life imprisonment.

Pakistan’s “blasphemy” law can easily be misused by people with a grudge against someone else, and Christians are particularly vulnerable to false accusation by Muslims. Often the mere accusation of “blasphemy” is enough to incite vigilante violence against Christian communities, and police can sometimes fail to act to protect the Christians. However, police officers in Kotli Muhammad Sadique were commended by Pakistani Christian lawyers for playing an “important role in keeping the situation under control and the community safe”.

There are around 40 Christian homes in Kotli Muhammad Sadique and most of the Christians work in nearby brick-kilns. Locals say the village has never experienced any trouble related to religion before.

A 16-year-old Pakistani Christian girl, brutally raped by a gang of Muslim robbers because of her faith, acted selflessly to save her younger sister from sexual attack on 28 December 2020, in Sheikhpura district Punjab. “Don’t do anything to my sister, whatever you do, do to me,” the older sister told the men as the two girls were led away. The younger girl, aged 14, was physically unhurt but is extremely distressed. Her older sister is shocked and traumatised.

The attack happened after three robbers held up a rickshaw in which the girls were travelling with their father and three other family members.

Police later arrested the men who confessed they had been robbing people

on the same Sheikhpura road for five years but claimed to have “never done anything bad before,” adding, “We only raped because they were Christian.”

A local pastor, who has been visiting and praying with the family several times a day, said, “We cannot forget what happened, but we are trusting in the Lord to heal. Because the family are Christians it is very difficult to get justice.”

Praise God for Imran’s release and pray that he, and other Christians recently acquitted of “blasphemy”, will recover from spending long years in jail and use their freedom to be a beacon of Christ’s love and forgiveness (Matthew 5:16). Pray that false accusations will be justly exposed and police officers given courage not to be manipulated by their fear of reprisals. Pray for Azeem, Irfan and Abbas, and ask that they will be kept safe from attack by zealous Muslims now that they are out on bail. Ask that the police will not press more severe charges under section 295-B of the penal code which has a mandatory life sentence. Thank God that the local police are working to keep the Christian community in Kotli Muhammad Sadique safe, ask for His protection over them and the accused Christians and that the peaceful coexistence with their Muslim neighbours will be restored. Pray that the young Christian sisters, and their family, will recover from the shock and trauma of their ordeal and will, as their pastor said, “trust in the Lord to heal”. Ask that God will sweep away any obstacles to justice, and that the men who confessed their cruel crime to the police will encounter the Lord Jesus, who alone can cleanse from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

Cameroon – At least 13 people killed in suicide bomb attack

At least 13 people were killed in a suicide bomb attack in predominantly-Christian Mozogo, Mayo Tsanaga department, in Far North Cameroon, after armed militants, thought to be Boko Haram, attacked the community in the early hours of Friday 8 January.

According to the village chief, Mahamat Chetima Abba, the militants arrived wielding machetes and firing guns into the air and, as panicked villagers fled, a young female suicide bomber detonated her explosive device, killing men, women and children.

Of the people killed in the attack, five were children between the ages of 3 and 14, and another six children, aged 9 to 16, were “gravely injured”.

Ask that the Lord will be close to the grieving families and heal the devastated community. Pray that the villagers will have great endurance and patience in their faith, knowing that they are being strengthened with all power according to His glorious might (Colossians 1:11). Pray that the jihadi militants terrorising the area will recoil from their atrocities and that the peace of Christ would instead come to rule their hearts (Colossians 3:15).

Nigeria – Christians murdered as a “Christmas present” in terror attacks on Christmas Eve

At least 24 people were killed, over 20 abducted, a church burnt and a pastor kidnapped by jihadi militants during two attacks on Christmas Eve, in Borno and Adamawa states, Nigeria.

On 24 December, armed militants raided the predominantly Christian village of Pemi, near Chibok, in Borno State, on trucks and motorcycles, firing on villagers, killing eleven people, and setting fire to buildings, according to local reports.

The militants, thought to belong to Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), an off-shoot of Boko Haram,

are reported to have travelled from their base in the nearby Sambisa forest. At least eight soldiers were also reported killed at outposts in the region at the time of the attacks.

Jihadists abducted at least 20 Christians in the region and singled out five to be lined up and shot in a second Christmas Eve attack in Garkida, Adamawa State. In an online video released by the militants showing the killings, a voice said, “Celebrate your Christmas with the present of the heads of these Christians,” followed by the sound of gun fire as the Christians were shot.

The militants also set ablaze homes, shops, cars and bulldozers. Many of the villagers fled during the attacks.

Pray that God will protect his people in Nigeria and the time that marks the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, the coming of life in all its fullness (John 10:10), and pray that other Christian celebrations such as Easter, will no longer be targeted by extremists. Ask that the Lord will strengthen the traumatised communities as they rebuild and recover from the destructive attacks. Pray for any still displaced by the violence, that they will be able to return safely to their homes.

Armenia – Eleven POWs killed and 70 soldiers captured following Azerbaijani ceasefire violations

Eleven Armenian prisoners of war have been killed by their Azerbaijani captors, and more than 70 Armenian soldiers taken captive following Azerbaijan’s violation of the ceasefire, which had halted the fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh on 10 November. Footage emerged on 15 December showing the shooting of the eleven prisoners.

Azerbaijani forces have also taken control of four Armenian villages in addition to territory gained during the fighting, which took place from September to November this year.

These incidents come amidst allegations of Azerbaijani war crimes committed during that fighting, including the beheading of two elderly men and an attack on Ghazanchetsots Cathedral in the town of Shushi. Azerbaijani soldiers have also been accused of atrocities such as defiling corpses and desecrating graves during their advance.

On Monday 14 December, Russian forces acting in a peacekeeping capacity effected the return of 44 Armenian prisoners of war as part of a prisoner exchange.

A Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement, signed on 9 November, had led to an abatement in the conflict. This agreement required Armenia to cede large areas of the Nagorno-Karabakh region previously under its control to Azerbaijan.

Barnabas has launched a petition calling for the UK government to recognise the Armenian Genocide. Copies of this petition are available from 9 Priory Row, Coventry, CV1 5EX or to download from: barnabasfund.org/armenian-genocide

The ongoing conflict has raised fears about the ambitions of Azerbaijan and Turkey, as well as the possibility of a regional pan-Turkic war and a new Armenian genocide.

Pray for the families of the eleven prisoners of war who were shot, ask that the Lord will comfort those who mourn (Matthew 5:4). Pray that truth will prevail and that the ceasefire agreement will be honoured, and ask for wisdom for global political leaders so that they will steer and influence the situation towards a peaceful and just outcome. Ask that the many displaced Armenians will have access to shelter, food and other basic necessities. Pray for the success of Barnabas Fund’s new petition calling for governments who have not yet recognised the Armenian Genocide and that it will draw the world’s attention to the current plight of Armenian Christians.

“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”

Galatians 6:9

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