

will abound (2 Corinthians 9:8) and that more families in Sikapai will turn to the Lord. Pray that the authorities in India will enforce the religious freedom that is guaranteed in the country's constitution.

Azerbaijan – Amendments to Religion Law place restrictions on appointment of church leaders and holding meetings

Amendments to both the Religion Law and the Administrative Code of Azerbaijan will bar churches from appointing leaders without state approval.

The amendments, signed into law by President Ilham Aliyev on 16 June, require the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations to approve the appointment of all non-Islamic religious leaders in Muslim-majority Azerbaijan.

Churches and other places of worship must have a state-recognised “religious centre” or headquarters (as distinct from a local place of worship) in order to apply for permission to appoint foreign-born ministers, or invite foreign-born persons to lead meetings. The position concerning congregations without a religious centre who already have foreign-born leaders is uncertain.

The amendments do not clarify how churches may apply for recognition of a named religious centre. Smaller churches

may be unable to gain such recognition and may be declared illegal.

Churches now also require the State Committee's approval to hold “mass events” (a term not clearly defined) anywhere except state-registered places of worship. Those churches that have not been able to secure registration are left especially vulnerable, as some of them meet in private homes. In April 2021 the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) added Azerbaijan to its special watch list (SWL) for “engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom”.

Seek the Lord on behalf of His people in Azerbaijan as they consider their response to the new legislation. Ask that the government of Azerbaijan will govern with fairness and wisdom. Pray that the Lord will overrule regarding the new Religion Law so that those He chooses will be able to lead His people in Azerbaijan. Call on Him to give wisdom, hope and courage to Christians now that meeting to pray together in a private home has become potentially illegal. Ask that politicians will not allow their judgment to be distorted by anti-Christian prejudice and that they will recognise the positive influence of Christians on Azerbaijani society. Pray that Christians are not discouraged but will use discernment to advance the Gospel by any means (1 Corinthians 9:22).

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Nigeria – Twenty-eight killed in more attacks by Fulani militants in Christian-majority southern Kaduna State; Scores of students kidnapped from Christian school

Ten people, including an infant, were killed overnight on 12-13 July as armed Fulani militants continued their attacks on Atyap communities in Zangon Kataf Local Government Area of Christian-majority southern Kaduna State, Nigeria. Around 84% of the Atyap people are Christians.

Two men were killed in Magamiya village when gunmen attacked at around 11 p.m. In a two-hour assault, homes were looted and set on fire.

The attackers went on to storm the village of Matyei, killing eight people, including an infant, in the early hours of 13 July. All 156 homes in the community and its church were burned down. A church and at least twelve homes were razed in an assault on the nearby community of Abuyab.

In separate assaults on Atyap communities, 18 villagers were killed and homes destroyed in the villages of

Makarau and Warkan on 11 July and 9 July, respectively.

It is estimated that since July 2020 at least 100 Atyap people have been killed, about 24 Atyap villages burned, and hundreds of hectares of farmland laid waste by Fulani militants.

The growing insecurity is making it almost impossible for farmers to work on their farms, thus increasing poverty.

In the early hours of 5 July, around 120 students were abducted by gunmen from Bethel Baptist High School, a Christian boarding school in Kaduna State. One was later found exhausted, wandering in the bush by an army patrol. Another student, released by the kidnapers because of ill health, revealed the students were being treated well and are allowed to worship by their abductors.

Cry out to the Lord for the release of the students from Bethel Baptist High School held captive. Pray for their spiritual, physical and emotional wellbeing in this ordeal and ask that they may know refuge under His wings (Psalm 91:4). Ask that those mourning the loss of loved ones in the attacks

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on the Atyp communities will know His comfort and strength (Matthew 5:4). Remember the persecutors in prayer that they will come under the Holy Spirit's conviction and turn to Christ in repentance.

Algeria – Three churches once again forced to close

Three churches in the Oran area of Algeria have been closed after a legal battle that began in 2017.

On 4 June 2020 the administrative court of Oran ordered that the churches should be shut, and each church building was sealed on 7 July.

The churches were first ordered to close by the governor of Oran Province in 2017 and 2018, but all had re-opened by the end of 2018.

The court decision results from a case filed by the governor in August 2019 seeking to force the churches' closure.

Committees of officials started regularly visiting churches in late 2017, with the declared aim of checking safety, but they also required churches to seek permits from the National Commission for Non-Muslim Worship in order to operate. However, despite numerous requests from some churches the Commission has never issued a permit.

At least 20 churches have been closed since late 2017, most of which remain sealed.

Lift up our brothers and sisters in Algeria who have received repeated setbacks with church closures. Pray for the re-opening of the churches in Oran, and elsewhere in Algeria. Pray that they will draw strength from Jesus' example of faithfulness and not grow weary or lose heart (Hebrews 12:3). Ask that, whatever their circumstances, they will be confident that nothing can separate them from the

love of God that is in Christ Jesus, and that this attitude will draw Muslim friends and neighbours to the Lord (Romans 8:35-39).

Pakistan – Murder case opens after Christian factory worker dies following abuse by co-workers

Shahzad Masih, 36, a Christian, was confronted by Muhammad Abdullah and Muhammad Fizan on 18 June at GM Bora factory, Faisalabad, where they all worked. Lawyers acting on behalf of Shahzad's family claim that the pair subjected him to a violent indecent assault, causing severe internal injuries. Despite hospital treatment, Shahzad died on 20 June.

Shahzad had started working at the factory earlier that month and was staying in factory quarters with both co-workers when he was assaulted.

Police arrested Muhammad Abdullah and Muhammad Fizan along with factory manager Asad Mahmood, whose involvement in the assault was confirmed by Shahzad before he died.

Thank the Lord for the involvement of Christian lawyers in the case and pray that God will guide and protect them as they seek justice for Shahzad. Ask that the trial will be conducted fairly and that a just outcome will be achieved for his family. Pray also that Christians harassed at the workplace in Pakistan or held back in low-paid employment will know the comforting, sustaining power of their Advocate on high (1 John 2:1).

Myanmar – Pastors arrested for leading prayers for peace

Three pastors from Kachin state have been arrested for organising prayers for peace in

Myanmar. Marip Yaw Shu, chairman of the Rawang Literature and Culture Committee (RLCC), brought a lawsuit against them for conducting an inter-denominational prayer service in Naungmoon township of Putao district on 3 March, organised in the wake of unrest after the army seized power in a military coup on 1 February.

Pastor Koshan Singar, Pastor Z Kaw Htinah and Pastor M Hawng Di were arrested on 28 June. The RLCC have accused the pastors of incitement to cause fear, spreading false news and agitating for criminal offences against government employees, charges for which they face a possible three years' imprisonment.

The RLCC chairman acquired approval from the Putao military authorities to charge the three Christian leaders on 14 June.

The Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC) has called for prayers for the immediate release of the pastors.

Serious concerns have been raised about the pastors' health. Pastor Hawng Di, in his 70s, has high blood pressure and suffers from stomach problems. Another pastor is recovering from a stroke.

Give thanks for the three pastors' leadership, faithfulness and courage in conducting the prayer meeting in March. Call out to God that the message of the Gospel will bear much fruit, as a result of both the prayer meeting and the pastors' testimony (Colossians 1:6). Pray for the health of the pastors, especially Pastor Hawng Di, that they will receive the necessary medical attention and that the Lord will intervene to grant their release so that they may resume their ministry to God's people.

India – Eight Christian families driven out of their village by extremists

Extremists have destroyed the homes of eight Christian families and forcibly expelled them from their village.

The attack was carried out in the remote community of Sikapai village, in Rayagada district of Odisha, in April 2021. The mob devastated the Christians' homes and forced them to leave the village. Initially the Christian families were not allowed to recover belongings before police intervened to calm the situation. The families took refuge in a forest nearby.

Of the 40 families in Sikapai only these eight are Christian. A pastor paid tribute to the Christians' strong faith in Jesus since they converted from the Kui tribal religion about ten years ago.

One of the victims declared that the attackers "can destroy our homes, but not our faith in Jesus". A young girl testified that the villagers tried to force Christians to worship their gods and eat food offered in the temple, pointedly adding, "As their gods seem to flee away by our presence in the village, they are opposing us."

Praise God for the faith and resilience of the Christians driven out of Sikapai. Pray that the young girl's testimony of God's power will remain with her and others as an encouragement in these days of trial. Call on the Lord to reveal to their persecutors the consequences of their actions and the blessings they lose without the Christian presence in the village (Genesis 12:3). Pray that our heavenly Father will sustain our brothers and sisters in the jungle, especially now that the rainy season is at its height, and will provide new homes for them soon. Ask that their influence for good on their neighbours