India – Karnataka government to introduce new anti-conversion bill; Pastors halt prayer meetings after police warn of extremist attacks; Inspection of Christians disproves forced conversions claim

The Karnataka state government plans to introduce a new anti-conversion bill during the legislative assembly session of 13-24 December. At time of writing the bill has yet to be introduced. If the bill becomes law, Karnataka will become the tenth Indian state to criminalise conversions carried out through force, fraud or allurement.

Christians have protested against the proposed law and opposition parties have declared their intention to oppose it.

Pastors in the Belagavi district of Karnataka have stopped holding weekend prayer meetings in rented halls or private homes following a series of attacks by radical Hindutva nationalists falsely alleging that forced conversions were taking place.

Police warned pastors informally that it is “in their own interest” to halt the meetings to avoid confrontation with the radicals.

“The police have told prayer groups that only those denominations with churches will be allowed to pray. All others have stopped public prayers,” said Nanda Kumar, district superintendent of the Belagavi Methodist Church. Police have also asked hall owners not to rent out their premises for prayers.

Prayer halls are being attacked regularly by extremist groups. On Sunday 28 November radicals barged into a prayer meeting in Belur, in Karnataka’s Hassan district, falsely claiming that forced religious conversions were taking place.

A local government official in Karnataka, however, tasked with conducting an investigation into alleged forced conversions to Christianity found no substance to support such allegations.

In October the administrative officer, Y Thippeswamy, responsible for Chitradurga district, was required by the state government to inquire into complaints of forced conversions. In two villages officials spoke to 46 Christian families. No evidence was found of coercion to convert.

“Since the families claimed they had wilfully converted to Christianity, we decided to call off our survey,” said Thippeswamy. He added that the families were “in a much better place now and believe the new faith is the reason for their wellbeing”.

Seek the Lord that whatever legislation is introduced in Karnataka, His people will be able to worship in peace. Pray that the attacks on church meetings will cease and that restrictions on Christians gathering will be lifted. Thank the Lord for answered prayer with the clear evidence of a government survey demonstrating the transforming power of His love in Christians’ lives (1 John 3:1). Ask that our brothers and sisters throughout Karnataka will be encouraged by the power of their testimony.

Nigeria – Zamfara churches threatened with attack; Christian Association of Nigeria protests as US removes country from list of religious freedom violators; Freed head boy praised for leadership during kidnap ordeal

Churches in Zamfara State, northern Nigeria, have been threatened with attack unless they close down and stop meeting for worship. The threat, believed to come from Islamist militants, was made in a letter sent to Nigerian police and security services.

The Zamfara branch of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) has directed churches not to hold meetings after 5 p.m. for the next three months.

The CAN has also protested at the US government’s decision not to list Nigeria as a “Country of Particular Concern” on freedom of religion. CAN President Samson Ayokunie said that the organisation’s leadership was “at a loss” regarding the decision, adding that “our prayer is that Nigeria would be a country where no religious group is discriminated against or persecuted”.

The head boy of Bethel Baptist High School, freed by kidnappers on health grounds after more than 150 days in captivity, has been praised for his leadership and bravery.

The 17-year-old had refused to join students released previously by the kidnappers, stating that he would not come home as long as any one of the estimated 120 pupils abducted by gunmen from the Christian boarding school in Kaduna State on 5 July 2021 was still being held.

He was released on 26 November after becoming “terribly ill”, said Pastor John Joseph Hayab, chairman of Kaduna State CAN, adding, “That boy is worth celebrating. If at his age he can display that kind of leadership, we are so impressed.” Three Bethel students remain in captivity.

Kidnappers have released the majority of students in batches since July. Some students managed to escape their captors.

Intercede for Christians in Zamfara State so that they will not feel alone (Hebrews 13:5) amid intimidation. Ask that the international community will take seriously the violence towards Christians in Nigeria. Join Pastor John Joseph in celebrating the courage and strong leadership skills of Bethel Baptist High School’s head boy. Pray for his recovery, for the Redeemer’s comforting hand (Job 19:25) on all those affected by the ordeal and for the safe release of the remaining three students.
Pakistan – Church leaders condemn Priyantha Kumara killing

Church leaders in Pakistan have condemned the killing in Sialkot, Punjab of a Sri Lankan factory manager who was accused of “blasphemy”. On 3 December, Priyantha Kumara – a Buddhist – allegedly took down a poster that included the name of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, ahead of factory renovation work.

The accusations of “blasphemy” resulted in hundreds of people gathering at the factory. The mob violently attacked Kumara, beating and torturing him to death before setting his body on fire. Police have so far arrested more than 50 suspects for Kumara’s murder.

The incident demonstrates the risks faced by religious minorities, including Christians, in Pakistan. In Faisalabad Christian staff nurse Maryam Lal was accused of removing a sticker that contained a Quranic text in April 2021. Lal was attacked and cut with a knife before police rescued her and another Christian nurse from an angry mob.

Iqbal Masih, the pastor of a church in Sialkot, called for a change in the “blasphemy” law, saying, “The victim doesn’t get a chance to explain his position.”

The comments of Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan have raised hopes that action may now be taken over misuse of “blasphemy” laws and false “blasphemy” accusations. “Let me make this clear,” said Khan, “I have decided that from now we will not spare those who resort to violence in the name of religion.”

Pakistan’s notorious “blasphemy” laws (Section 295 of the Pakistan Penal Code) are often used to make false accusations in order to settle personal grudges. Christians are especially vulnerable, as simply stating their beliefs can be construed as “blasphemy” and lower courts usually favour the testimony of Muslims, in accordance with sharia.

Give thanks for the swift condemnation of the killing of Priyantha Kumara from the Pakistan government as well as Christian leaders. Pray that the authorities will follow words with action to reduce the harm caused to Christians and other religious minorities by spurious accusations of “blasphemy”. Ask that from this horrific crime will emerge just amendments to the law and that Christians will continue to demonstrate that the Lord is their righteousness (Jeremiah 23:6) and vindication.

Armenia – Azerbaijani aggression a cause for concern, say Christian leaders

The leadership of the Armenian Apostolic Church has “deep concerns” regarding Azerbaijani aggression on Armenia’s eastern border.

In a statement church leaders said, “Azerbaijan, ignoring the terms of the 9 November 2020 trilateral statement [the ceasefire agreement brokered by Russia that ended fighting between Azerbaijan and Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh], claims new ambitions for the sovereign territories of the state of Armenia.”

The church called upon “the international community” and other churches “to raise their voices by all possible means, to stop the next encroachments of the Azerbaijani side for the salvation of human lives, protection of fundamental rights, and prevention of a new tragedy”.

A recent outbreak of fighting ended in a ceasefire, negotiated with the support of Russia, but Armenia’s Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said that since May 2021 Azerbaijan has appropriated around 41 square kilometres (16 square miles) of Armenian territory.

Armenian church leader Hovakim Manukyan said that “the situation is worse than is presented in the media and official channels”, adding that Azerbaijan’s intention is to take control of Armenian territory in order to create a land corridor to the Azerbaijani enclave of Nakhichevan and Turkey.

Azerbaijan’s invasion of Nagorno-Karabakh, an ethnic-Armenian enclave within the Muslim-majority Republic of Azerbaijan, began at the end of September 2020, with the political and military support of Turkey. The conflict ended in November 2020 with Azerbaijan having taken significant territories that had formerly belonged to the Armenian community.

Call out to the Lord for the protection of Christians of Armenia. Praise Him for the great Christian tradition of the Armenian people and pray that they will demonstrate a spiritual depth that will confound any who would seek to persecute them (Luke 21:15). Pray that they will know the Lord as their shield and fortress at this uncertain time (Psalm 18:2).

Haiti – Abducted Christian missionaries escape from Haiti kidnappers

The remaining twelve members of a group of 17 Christian missionaries and children abducted by an armed gang in Haiti in October have escaped from their captors. They were flown out of Haiti to the US on 16 December.

US-based Christian Aid Ministries issued a statement on 17 December announcing that all the hostages released, “including the 10-month-old baby, the 3-year-old boy, and the 6-year-old boy, seem to be doing reasonably well”. Two members of the group were previously released on Sunday 21 November, and three more on 5 December.

The missionaries and their driver were abducted by the notorious 400 Mawozo gang, known for carrying out kidnappings and killings in the region, on 16 October. The Christian group comprised 16 Americans and one Canadian and included five children.

Praise the Lord that the twelve remaining missionaries have escaped and that all are now free. Give thanks to God for sustaining them in the dark hours of captivity, and for their trust in the Lord’s deliverance about which they were able to sing repeatedly (Psalm 34:7). Thank God for the clear witness of His love and the need for repentance that they communicated to their captors. Pray that our brothers and sisters will receive the privacy and rest they need to recover from their ordeal and resume their lives.

“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had” – Romans 15:5