

# Prayer Focus Update

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HOPE AND AID FOR THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

**Prayer Focus** | Update Number 330 | **April 2024**

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***“You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you.” – Isaiah 26:3***

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## Pakistan – Christian Brothers Acquitted of “Blasphemy” and Terrorism Charges

Praise God for answered prayers with the acquittal of Christian brothers Umar Saleem and Umair Saleem on charges including “blasphemy” following the anti-Christian riots that ravaged the Christian area of Jaranwala in August, 2023.

Defense lawyer Tahir Bashir told the Anti-Terrorism Court in Faisalabad, on February 29, that the brothers were innocent and there was no evidence against them. Bashir, a lawyer with the Center for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS), which provides legal aid to Christians, with support from Barnabas Aid, informed the court that a police investigation had exonerated both brothers.

The brothers were charged under all three of Pakistan’s notorious “blasphemy” laws, including Section 295-C of the Penal Code. This section relating to defiling the name of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, carries a mandatory death penalty.

They also were accused under Section 9 of Pakistan’s Anti-Terrorism Act with stirring up sectarian hatred.

Police confirmed to the court that two Muslim men plotted to implicate the brothers because of a “personal enmity” against them. The Muslim men have been arrested and are being held in jail.

The Muslim men’s unfounded allegations that the Saleem brothers had desecrated pages of the Quran stirred up a Muslim mob to rampage through the Christian area of Jaranwala city on August 16, 2023, burning at least 24 churches and several dozen smaller chapels and attacking the homes of more than 100 believers.

**Praise the Lord** for the acquittal and release from prison of Umar and Umair. Give thanks for the courage of lawyer Tahir Bashir and the judge in standing up for the rights of the Christian minority. Lift up the Saleem brothers and pray for their physical, emotional and spiritual recovery from their arrest and detention ordeal. Pray that the God of all grace will restore them, making them strong, firm and

steadfast (1 Peter 5:10). Ask also for healing for their traumatized families. Pray for protection for the brothers and their lawyers against zealous Muslims who may still try to attack them, despite the court's acquittal verdict. Ask that the court's decision will serve as a powerful deterrent against unfounded "blasphemy" allegations against Christians.

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## **Pakistan – Two Christian Sanitation Workers Die because of Lack of Safety Equipment**

Lift up in prayer the families of two Pakistani Christian sanitation workers who died after being sent into a sewer in Faisalabad without any protective equipment.

Cousins Shan Masih, 28, and Asif Masih, 25, suffocated on March 17 after inhaling poisonous gases while attempting to clear a blockage in the sewer. The cousins each leave a wife and three children.

Marginalized Christians in Muslim-majority Pakistan often work the lowest paid, dirtiest and most dangerous jobs, such as sanitation workers, often without proper protective equipment.

Human Rights Focus Pakistan President Naveed Walter stated that the men were "forced" to enter the sewer without being given protective gear, such as masks. This is despite a 2015 court order requiring local authorities to ensure such protection is provided.

"Such incidents involving sanitary workers are not new; they have been happening for years," said Walter, who pointed out that Christians currently make up 90% of sanitation workers in Faisalabad.

In 2021, two Christian sanitation workers died saving a Christian colleague tasked with clearing a sewer in Sargodha, Punjab province. None of the men were supplied with any protective equipment.

**Ask the Lord** to draw close to the families of Shan and Asif and comfort them in their grief. Pray that local authorities throughout Pakistan will address the provision of proper protective equipment as a matter of urgency. Ask the Lord to preserve His servants even in the midst of trouble (Psalm 138:7) and shield them from harm. Pray that no more Christian sanitation workers or others will suffer death or serious ill-health through lack of protection.

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## **Burkina Faso – Fifteen Christians Killed in Islamist Attack on church**

Christians in Burkina Faso need our prayers after at least 15 worshippers were killed during an attack on a church on Sunday, February 26.

Two others were injured when suspected Islamist militants opened fire during a service in Essakane village in Oudalan province, close to the border with Mali and Niger in the north-east of the country.

Church leaders announced in a statement that 12 people were killed instantly and three others died in hospital.

“In this painful circumstance, we invite you to pray for those who died in faith, for the healing of the wounded, and for the consolidation of grieving hearts,” the statement added. It is the latest slaughter attributed to Islamists waging a nine-year campaign of violence in Burkina Faso, much of it targeted against Christians and churches.

More than two million people have been driven from their homes and thousands have been killed during the insurgency, which began when Muslim extremists in neighboring Mali and Niger began moving into the north of Burkina Faso in 2015. Jihadists now control more than 40% of the nation.

**Pray for** the Lord’s presence to comfort those mourning the loss of loved ones (Matthew 5:4). Ask for healing for those wounded in the attack. Pray for the Lord to be a shield of protection over citizens of

Burkina Faso, particularly our brothers and sisters in Christ (Psalm 3:3). Pray that peace and security will return to the land.

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## **Laos – District Officials Enforce Law to Enable House Church to Reopen**

Your prayers are already having an impact as the small house church in southern Laos attacked by residents and village leaders in February is now reopening under the protection of district authorities.

On Sunday, February 4, a mob of residents and village authorities tore down the house where Christians in Kaleum Vangke village in Savannakhet province's Xonboury district were gathered and interrupted the worship service (see *Prayer Focus Update*, March 2024). The attackers also burned Bibles and other documents.

Ministry of Public Security officials have since stepped in to protect the Christians' right to worship, a resident of the village and church member stated at the end of February. "[The officials] announced that from now on, our fellow Christians can resume worship," he said. "So, starting this week, we're rebuilding our place of worship. Right now, we're putting wooden planks back up."

Another churchgoer added that while the building is being repaired, the church will still meet for worship.

"But the village authorities and other non-Christian villagers are still threatening us, threatening to tear down our place of worship again," he said. "But we are getting stronger now. We're not afraid to get together at that house anymore."

**Praise God** for the swift answer to your prayers as the district authorities did indeed uphold the law that gives Christians in Laos the right to conduct services. Give thanks also that our brothers and sisters have received Divine encouragement, not only to build on the cornerstone of our faith, but also to begin physically rebuilding their place of worship. Pray that Christians in Kaleum Vangke will stand

firm in their faith without being frightened by their opponents and that regular worship will be firmly established (Philippians 1:27-28). Pray that their steadfastness will encourage Christians throughout rural Laos, and that there will be no further evictions of Christians from their villages.

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## **Myanmar – Pastor Shot Dead by Gunmen**

A Christian community in Kachin State, northern Myanmar, is mourning the loss of its pastor who was killed by gunmen on March 18.

Three armed men entered 47-year-old Nammye Hkun Jaw Li's computer shop in Nam Ma Tee village, Mogaung township around 2pm.

"Three men came and said they wanted to print on vinyl and shot him dead. They shot him in his stomach twice, and when he did not die, they also shot him in the head," a Nam Ma Tee resident said.

Nammye Hkun Jaw Li is survived by his wife and three children.

**Lift up** the family of Nammye Hkun Jaw Li and the Christian community of Mogaung township to the Lord. Pray that they will take refuge in the Lord as they grieve for the loss of their husband, father and shepherd (Psalm 91:1-2).

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## **Myanmar – Military Arrests Pastor and Youths in Kachin State**

Also in Kachin State, a pastor and 16 youths were arrested on March 10 when the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) raided a shelter camp run by the Kachin Baptist Convention in Banmaw town. Those arrested were reportedly taken to a military base in Banmaw town, but at the time of writing their whereabouts is unknown.

**Pray for** the release of the pastor and young people and that they will experience their Lord as a mighty stronghold in the day of trouble (Nahum 1:7). Ask the Lord to shield His people amidst the conflict and displacement in Myanmar.

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## **.gives – Shipments Heading for Ukraine, Jordan, Pakistan**

Your prayers are valued for the distribution of aid across the world through our .gives projects. Two shipments of food to Fiji have arrived and are being distributed on the ground.

A shipment from the USA to Ukraine has arrived and is being distributed. This soup mix has been used to feed and give Ukrainian Christians warmth over the last of the cold months. Lentils from Australia have arrived in Zimbabwe and are being distributed at the time of writing.

Upcoming deliveries include a 40ft truck of food.gives boxes and other food items that is about to leave the United Kingdom for Ukraine. A 40ft container of dried soup mix from the USA is on its way to Jordan. Two containers of food boxes, one each from Australia and New Zealand, are being prepared for sending to Pakistan.

**Give thanks** for the arrival of recent consignments. Pray for the successful delivery of aid, especially to reach Christians in conflict-ravaged Ukraine. Pray also for safe passage of soup mix to Jordan, especially given the disturbances in the Red Sea.

# **Barnabas Aid provides practical aid for suffering Christians in over 60 different countries.**

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