

# Barnabas Prayer Focus

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hope and aid for the persecuted church

A monthly resource for individuals and prayer groups produced by Barnabas Fund

Number 287 - September 2020



## China – Show loyalty to party or stay shut is authorities' ultimatum to Henan churches

Authorities in China's central Henan province will only allow churches to reopen after Covid lockdown if they demonstrate their loyalty to the communist party and increase patriotic education.

On 14 June, the government of Yucheng county, in Shangqui city, ordered preachers of "three-self" (i.e. state registered) churches to give sermons in a unified style that extolled President Xi Jinping for "the right way to lead people in defeating the epidemic" while criticising the US and other countries.

A pastor said, "I had to preach as the state required, otherwise the church would not have reopened".

Authorities list of directives to Churches issued in mid-June, for reopening, included orders to step up patriotic education and promote policies that "sinicise" (i.e. make Chinese) religion and for preaching to include "core socialist values".

"Instead of a normal sermon, the preacher talked about the patriotism of medical workers during the epidemic, and their sacrifice to the state," said a member of a "three-self" church in Henan after its first meeting in six months.

**Pray** that Christians in China will be given strength to endure the increasing government interference in church life, especially after worship has been restricted for so long by lockdown. Ask that pastors will be given wisdom to navigate the obstacles

set before them and find ways to spiritually feed their congregations knowing that the Word of the Lord endures forever (1 Peter 1:25).

## Pakistan – Court returns kidnapped Christian girl of 14 to Muslim man who forced her into marriage

A 14-year-old Pakistani Christian girl, who was abducted at gunpoint and forced into marriage by a Muslim man, was returned to her kidnapper by the High Court in Lahore on 4 August, overturning an earlier court ruling that had placed her in a women's shelter. The court ruled that Maria Shahbaz had willingly converted to Islam, was legally married to Mohammad Naqash and should be "a good wife" to him.

Maria was kidnapped close to her home in Madina Town, near Faisalabad, by Naqash on 28 April 2020. He and two accomplices fired gunshots into the air as they fled.

Maria's parents challenged the validity of the marriage, which took place days later, and submitted her birth certificate to the Faisalabad District and Sessions Court to prove she was underage.

Naqash, who is already married, claimed Maria was aged 19 and they had married in October 2019. However, the Muslim cleric named in the certificate provided by Naqash denied any involvement.

**Intercede** for Maria, that she will hold fast to her faith despite the unjust ruling against her. Ask that her parents will be comforted over the removal of their daughter from their family and will find courage, knowing

that their hope is in the LORD (Psalm 31:24). Pray that all abducted Christian girls and young women forced into Muslim marriages in Pakistan will be taken by the LORD's hand and soothed in their distress (Isaiah 41:13).

## Pakistan – Christian couple appeal against "blasphemy" conviction – urgent prayer needed for hearing on 10 September

Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar, a Pakistani Christian couple who have endured six years on death row after a "blasphemy" conviction, are due to have their appeal hearing in the High Court in Lahore on 10 September.

The couple, who have four children, were convicted in April 2014 of sending "blasphemous" text messages to two Muslims. Their appeal was due to be held in June but was adjourned twice.

Their case will be presented by Saif-ul-Mulook, a Muslim lawyer who in October 2018 secured the acquittal of Christian mother-of-five Aasia Bibi after she was convicted of "blasphemy" in 2009. He will tell the High Court that the illiterate couple were incapable of writing text messages and did not receive a fair trial.

**Ask** the Lord to strengthen Shafqat and Shagufta for the ordeal of the appeal hearing and that it will not be adjourned a third time. Pray that they will be justly acquitted by the court and soon reunited with their children. Ask for God's protection over the family and for brave Saif-ul-Mulook, who received death threats when Aasia Bibi was acquitted.

## Burkina Faso – Children among six killed as bomb explodes on road in northern Burkina Faso

At least six people, mostly children, were killed and four others injured when an improvised explosive device (IED) detonated on a road near a mainly-Christian community in northern Burkina Faso on 1 August.

The victims were “nearly all children who were returning from grazing their livestock,” said a local in Ouahigouya, the capital of Yatenga Province, when a cart some of them were travelling in rolled over an IED.

In May, Christians were among those targeted and killed when armed jihadists launched three separate attacks within 48 hours that left at least 58 dead. Violence by Islamist extremists has surged in Burkina Faso in the past year, causing thousands to flee their homes.

**Lift up** the families of the children and others murdered in the explosion in Burkina Faso, that they will be comforted by the Father of Compassion (2 Corinthians 1:3). Pray that those injured will heal from the trauma, in body and mind. Ask God to be a shield for Christian communities and pray that the hearts of the jihadists will become pained by the bloodshed so that they will seek their Peace in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:14).

## Cameroon and Nigeria – At least 18 murdered by Boko Haram in stealth raid on Cameroonian Christian community and Nigerian government criticized for failing to protect Christians as 154 more killed by Fulani militants

Several groups of Boko Haram militants, armed with rifles and machetes, descended on a camp for internally displaced people in Nguetchewe village, Far North Cameroon, killing at least 18 sleeping Christians in a stealth night assault on Sunday 2 August.

The jihadists injured several others as they ransacked houses in the hour-long attack in Mozogo district, Mayo Tsanaga department. The bodies of some of the victims were found dismembered and strewn across the compound.

A local witness said police intervention had “limited the massacre” causing the terrorists to withdraw across the Nigerian border. It is thought they were prevented from continuing with an assault on a local Christian mission, from which a minister and church workers had been kidnapped by Boko Haram in 2013.

In neighbouring northern Nigeria, at least 156 Christians were killed in July in Fulani militant attacks, including five horrific attacks in and around Kogoro town in July that left 38 dead. A student studying at a seminary close to where two of the attacks happened said, “We are in serious tension now but pray for our safety and God’s grace to sustain us.”

A strict curfew is making the situation worse for Christians in Kaduna, who are prevented from farming or accessing healthcare, but is having little impact on the violence. A prominent Nigerian economist, Dr Obadiah Mailafia, criticized the government for being “unwilling and unable” to protect Christian farmers and spoke out on the alleged collusion of security forces with Fulani militants.

**Call** on the LORD to rise up to protect the safety of His people in Cameroon and Nigeria (Psalm 74:22). Pray that the attack in Cameroon will not be followed by an escalation in violence. Ask that He will meet the needs of the many families who have lost loved ones and had homes destroyed in both countries. Pray that the Nigerian government will apprehend the glare of international scrutiny building over atrocities against Christian communities and swiftly implement effective security measures.

## Sri Lanka – Landslide victory of Buddhist nationalists opens the door for anti-conversion bill

The landslide victory of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka’s 5 August general election opens the door for his government to introduce anti-conversion legislation. The Sri Lanka Podujana Party (SLPP) won 145 seats in the 225-member Parliament, giving the Buddhist nationalist president an overall majority. The government is also close to securing the two-thirds

majority necessary to make the constitutional changes needed for anti-conversion legislation after discussions with political allies and smaller parties.

In March 2020, prime minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, brother of the president and a leading member of the majority Sinhala Buddhist community, had hinted to the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress that he would introduce laws criminalising conversions if he could be confident of receiving the support of parliament.

Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thero, a Buddhist monk and former secretary of a Buddhist nationalist organisation who is known for inciting violence towards non-Buddhist minority communities, was awarded a seat in parliament.

A local pastor described the result as “very concerning” for the minority Christian community, adding, “But our God is in control.”

Concerns were raised for the majority of evangelical Christians who are mainly converts and attend unregistered churches. “Those who have registered as a mainline church ... will have some protection,” said a pastor. “Unregistered churches are mostly poor, rural-based and not educated in their fundamental rights. We may face situations where pastors and believers [are] not realising the government restrictions and get themselves in trouble.”

Anti-conversion legislation would probably criminalise conversions “by force, fraud and allurement” in a similar way to the anti-conversion laws in place in several states of neighbouring India. Interestingly, these are called “Freedom of Religion” laws, and ban the use of force, fraud or allurement in conversion. Their vague terms make Christians actively sharing their faith vulnerable to false accusation and many Indian Christians have been harassed and persecuted under these laws.

**Ask** the exalted Ruler over all (1 Chronicles 29:12), that Buddhist nationalism would not be permitted to take any stronger hold in Sri Lanka under the new government. Pray that the LORD will incline the hearts of the newly elected government leaders to be wise in their policy-making and fair to Christians and other minorities.

**“For I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.” – Isaiah 41:13**

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