



Pakistan – Discovery of 1,000-year-old cross points to ancient Christian presence in Himalayas

An ancient marble cross, thought to be as much as 1,200 years old, has been discovered in the foothills of the Karakoram mountain range in the heart of the Himalayas, providing evidence for Christianity's early arrival in northern Pakistan from the Middle East.

Three University of Baltistan researchers and local mountaineers found the ancient 7 by 6 feet cross near their basecamp in the predominantly-Muslim region bordering with China, Afghanistan and India. The "Kavardo Cross", thought to be the largest discovered in the subcontinent, is estimated to weigh around four tons.

"Praise the Lord, this makes me very joyful," was the reaction of one Pakistani Christian leader. "It will be a great encouragement to Christians in Pakistan to show that our faith was here many, many generations ago."

Initial estimates place the cross between 1,000 and 1,200 years old, which, if accurate, would confirm the ancient presence of Christianity in the Himalayan region, where Christians are today a marginalized and persecuted minority.

The location, near the village of Kavardo, was once on the "Silk Road" trade route that linked China and Pakistan. The research team noted that the way the cross has been carved is similar to traditional Buddhist carving, suggesting that the Christians who made it may have been converts.

Christianity is often viewed in Pakistan as a relatively newly introduced religion brought by Western missionaries, and its ancient pre-Islamic presence is generally unknown. Every tangible reminder of the presence of Christians in Pakistan long ago is a great encouragement to today's beleaguered Christian minority.

Thank the Lord for the discovery of the Kavardo Cross, a remarkable testimony

to the eternal love of our Savior Jesus Christ (1 John 4:19). May its discovery uplift the hearts of Christians all over the world, especially our brothers and sisters in northern Pakistan who stand steadfast, despite enduring hostility and discrimination because of their faith.

Turkey – Church leaders call government to lift "entry ban" on serving pastors from overseas

The Istanbul Protestant Church Foundation (IPKV) issued a public appeal to the Turkish government on June 16 asking for tight new residency restrictions imposed on foreign pastors to be lifted.

The IPKV said in a press statement that since 2019 it has become "increasingly difficult" for overseas clergy serving in Turkey to be granted residency, a situation it views with "great sadness".

Many churches in Turkey, including the IPKV, have long looked overseas to fulfil church leadership roles because of a shortage of qualified clergy. Government restrictions on religious leadership training have severely limited opportunities for gaining suitable qualifications within the country. However, the IPKV said the authorities are now effectively imposing an "entry ban" on foreign church workers.

Some overseas Christians already living in Turkey have not had their residency permits renewed and some have had them cancelled. The IPKV said the non-Turkish wife of one of its Turkish pastors has had her residence permit application rejected, which threatens to separate her from her husband and three children.

Even the Spanish-born leader of the IPKV, who has served with the foundation since 2001 with official government approval, has been told he must re-apply for prior approval for entry.

The IPKV is taking legal action to try to have the ruling revoked. Protestant Christians are mainly converts from Islam and their children.

In a separate development, Turkey's Islamist president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has pledged to do "everything possible" to ensure respect for religious minorities and protect "peace and harmony between Turks and members of other minority faiths", his official spokesman said on June 2, following an attack on an Armenian church in Istanbul.

Communications Director Fahrettin Altun said the vandalism of St Gregory Church on May 23, when a man climbed the gates to pull down its cross, "will not go unpunished".

It was the third attack on an Armenian church in one month, according to Armenian politician and Turkish MP Garo Paylan. "Hate speech by the ruling power normalizes hate crime," he said.

Hostility towards Christians has worsened in recent years, as secularism has given way to Islamization with the rise of Erdogan's AKP. The president has been outspoken about his desire to recreate the Ottoman Empire.

Lift up Christian leaders in Turkey and ask that their appeal to the courts will be successful so that church leaders from overseas will be able to continue their ministry in Turkey. Pray that President Erdogan will be true to his pledge to foster respect for religious minorities, so that Christians can practice their faith openly and safely.

China – Persecution concerns mount as surveillance state genetically maps entire male population and pastor compares second raid on church to "violence of Mao's Cultural Revolution"

Chinese police were tasked to collect mandatory blood samples from up to 70 million – 10% of all men and boys – as the high-tech surveillance state builds a "DNA Skynet" of the country's 700 million males,

raising fresh persecution concerns for Christians and other marginalized groups.

The powerful genetic mapping tool, compiled from samples collected since 2017, will join up with China's existing countrywide video-surveillance network and be capable of tracking every male relative of any individual man from a sample of his genetic material.

The Chinese government already holds the largest DNA archive in the world comprising of some 80 million profiles, according to official state media, including genetic data from Uighurs and other ethnic minorities considered to be "potentially destabilizing".

Government surveillance systems, including an advanced facial recognition system, use sophisticated artificial intelligence and biometric technologies to target specific groups and minorities.

Any individual who refuses to give blood samples risks their family being listed as a "black household", according to one computer engineer from northern China. This would mean he and his relatives would be barred from benefits such as travel and hospital treatment.

In Jiangxi province, a Christian widow in her 60s had her government support subsidy terminated after she refused orders to remove Christian pictures from her home and to "stop believing in God".

The Christian in Fuzhou city had received the monthly pension of 250 Yuan (\$35) since her husband died in 2018. A government official told her, "Because the Communist Party feeds you, you must only believe in it, not God." Two months later the woman's benefits were cancelled.

The ongoing communist party crackdown against the Church is apparently part of Xi Jinping's five-year plan, announced in 2018, to "reinterpret" Christianity according to secular socialist views, in a process of "sinicization" (i.e. to make Chinese). In a series of repressive measures, hundreds of churches, both registered and unregistered, have been closed, pastors have been arrested and imprisoned and surveillance cameras installed inside churches.

Christians are increasingly comparing President Xi Jinping's crackdown on the Church to the violent oppression of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976.

A pastor of a "house church" (i.e. an unregistered congregation) in the city of Xiamen, which was raided by police on June 11 for the second time in six weeks, said, "This is just a snapshot of the way things are in China now. It is very similar to a fascist regime, or to the Cultural Revolution."

At least 48 state-registered churches were shut down in Yugan county, in Jiangxi province, in less than two weeks in April. A local Christian said, "[President] Xi Jinping follows the path of Mao Zedong, who cracked down on all religious beliefs and killed people of faith. If you refuse to obey the president who orders you not to attend religious meetings, you'll be arrested and imprisoned."

Pray that Christians in China will be strong in the Lord especially lifting up the shield of faith (Ephesians 6:10-17), as they endure increasingly invasive repression by the authorities. Ask that all Christians will know God as their ever-present help (Psalm 46:1) and remain steadfast in their faith. Pray for elderly believers whose state support has been stopped because of their Christian faith, asking that their heavenly Father will provide for them.

DRC – Militant extremists kill 57 villagers in attacks on mainly-Christian north-east

At least 57 people were killed in renewed attacks by jihadists on villages in the mainly-Christian north-east of the Democratic Republic of Congo, at the end of May.

Members of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an Islamist militant group active in the region for more than two decades, attacked Samboko village on May 26, murdering with machetes more than 40 villagers and looting food and other valuables.

A day earlier, on May 25, the extremists attacked the nearby village of Makutano, killing at least 17 people.

More than 700 people have been killed in Ituri province, where the two villages are located, since 2017, according to the UN. The north-east region has seen a surge of violence since October 2019, when the army launched a large-scale offensive against the ADF.

In January, the ADF murdered Pastor Ngulongo Year Batsemire, 60, after he refused their demands to convert to Islam. On the same day, militants murdered at least 30 people in raids on four villages in the Beni region.

Pray that all those who lost loved ones will be comforted (Matthew 5:4). Ask that the LORD will be a strong tower of protection (Proverbs 18:10) for our suffering family in the DRC, and pray that the long years of conflict will soon come to an end.

Mali – Heavily-armed jihadists murder 27 people in attacks on Christian villages

Heavily-armed jihadists on motorcycles killed 27 people in three attacks on mainly-Christian Dogon villages in central Mali in less than 24 hours on May 26.

Seven were killed, some burned alive, in the village of Tillé. Another 20 ethnic Dogon villagers were shot or burned to death in neighboring Bankass and Koro, local officials said.

Since 2016, jihadists have been waging a war to occupy north and central Mali with the declared aim of establishing sharia (Islamic law) throughout the country.

Mali suffered its worst year of extremist violence in seven years in 2019. Jihadi militants carried out murderous attacks in the north and central area, laying waste to Christian villages and causing hundreds to flee with only the clothes on their backs.

Ask that the LORD will comfort the bereaved and sustain them in their time of trouble (Psalm 3:3, 5). Pray for these vulnerable Christian communities in central Mali living under the threat of merciless attack, that no weapons forged against them will prevail (Isaiah 54:17).

"But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in Him." – Jeremiah 17:7

USA 80 Abbeyville Road, Lancaster PA 17603 Email usa@barnabasaid.org

UK 9 Priory Row, Coventry CV1 5EX Email info@barnabasfund.org

Australia PO Box 3527, Loganholme, QLD 4129 Email bfaustralia@barnabasfund.org

New Zealand PO Box 276018, Manukau City, Auckland 2241 Email office@barnabasfund.org.nz

South Africa Office 301, 3rd Floor, Eikestad Mall, 43 Andringa Street, Stellenbosch 7599 Email bfsa@barnabasfund.org


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