

under Kurdish control, that the Lord will be their refuge and fortress (Psalm 91:2). Ask that Saliba will be quickly released and will not be forced to fight.

## China - New religion regulations imposed on Chinese Christians

New religion regulations came into force across China on 1 February, as part of a government crackdown on “extremism”.

The updated regulations increase government scrutiny of religious literature and websites and require registered religious organisations not to “use religion to harm national security, disrupt social order ... or [do] other harm [to] national interests.” They also include new provisions against using religion to “spread extremism” and regulations requiring that “sites established for religions activates” – which includes registered churches – must be “in harmony with the needs of urban planning”.

Chinese authorities have demolished several churches in the last two months, including two in Shaanxi province. In one case, officials claimed a church was built on illegally occupied land and in the other that the church property violated building codes.

Accusations that Christians are undermining the state are already used as a pretext to arrest and jail believers in China. Although outright persecution of Christians in China is usually localised and sporadic, the newly-imposed and vaguely worded religion regulations appear to leave Christians in a more vulnerable position.

**Seek the Lord** on behalf of Chinese Christians, especially the many millions of believers who are part of the vibrant, unregistered “house church” movement; pray that they will encourage and build one another up (1 Thessalonians 5:11) as they face pressure and persecution. Pray that Chinese authorities will not take advantage of the new legislation to target believers.

# Barnabas Prayer Focus

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## Kenya - Al-Shabaab slaughter Christian teachers in night attack

Al-Shabaab militants murdered three Christians in an attack on a primary school compound in the village of Qarsa, north-east Kenya on 16 February. Armed men forced their way into a house within the compound of Qarsa Primary School before dawn. Two Christian teachers, Kevin Shari and Seth Oluoch Odada, were shot dead. Seth's wife Caroline was also brutally murdered – local sources reported, “her head was nearly cut off from the body”. The couple had only recently married.

Al-Shabaab have repeatedly targeted Christian teachers. According to local sources, such attacks are part of a deliberate effort to reduce school attendance, which makes children vulnerable to recruitment by the Somali-

based Islamist group. Al-Shabaab are known to make extensive use of child soldiers and the group is reported to have recruited children as young as nine.

A source told Barnabas Fund, “Again Lent has begun for us with high drama, pain, and agony from the cruel hands of Al-Shabaab ... people, especially Christians, are living in terror”.

**Lift up in prayer** Christian brothers and sisters facing Al-Shabaab attacks in north-east Kenya. Pray especially for the families of Kevin, Seth and Caroline that they will know the comfort of Christ in the midst of their troubles (2 Corinthians 1:4). Pray that, despite the threat of attack, Christians will hope in the Lord as their help and shield (Psalm 33:20), and that Kenyan authorities will take steps to protect isolated and vulnerable education establishments.

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## Pakistan - Christian teenager wrongly charged after “blasphemy” accusation leads to mob violence

Patras Masih, a 16-year-old Christian from Lahore, has been arrested and charged with “blasphemy” by Pakistani police, after an allegedly insulting post appeared on a Facebook group page under his name. He was charged after a twelve-hour mob protest, which forced the local Christian community to flee their homes.

A Facebook post of a photoshopped image depicting Patras standing on the dome of a mosque appeared online in his name on 16 January. There was no initial response from authorities. On 19 February, hundreds of Muslim protestors blocked roads in the Shahdara district, which is home to 400 Christian families, and began setting tyres alight and throwing stones at Christian properties. According to press reports, crowds swelled after an announcement was made in local mosques. Although police intervened to protect the Christians’ homes, the Christian families fled.

Police registered Patras’ case under section 295-C of the Pakistan penal code, which outlaws “defiling the name of Muhammad” and officially carries a mandatory death penalty (although no one has yet been executed under the law). However, Patras is not accused of insulting Muhammad, but

of “hurting religious sentiment”, which would normally legally fall under a different “blasphemy” law (285-A), for which the penalty is up to ten years’ imprisonment and a fine.

**Give thanks** that police intervened to protect Christian property from mob violence – unlike in 2013, when a Muslim mob torched 170 homes in the Christian community of Joseph Colony in Lahore, following an unsubstantiated “blasphemy” allegation. Pray that the flimsy case against Patras will be swiftly overturned and that his family (who have been forced to go into hiding) will be able to return to their home in Lahore and resume their life.

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## Sudan - Khartoum church demolished by police hours after Sunday service

Police demolished a Presbyterian church in a suburb of Khartoum, Sudan’s capital, on Sunday 11 February, hours after the Sunday service had finished. The church had been scheduled for demolition by authorities since 2016, as one of 25 which the government claimed violated land regulations. Prior to destroying the church in Khartoum on 11 February, the police confiscated all the books, equipment and chairs inside the building.

In recent years, Sudan’s government has accelerated efforts to eradicate Christianity by deporting Christians,

shutting down Christian schools and demolishing church buildings – it is frequently claimed churches do not own the land on which places of worship are built, or that land has been earmarked for “development”.

**Intercede** for Sudanese Christians, who have been the targets of a deliberate campaign by the government since South Sudan seceded from the north in 2011. Ask that they will not be discouraged, but instead will be strong and courageous (Joshua 10:25), despite the efforts of authorities to eradicate what is left of the Christian presence in the 97% Muslim country. Pray that the Khartoum congregation will be able to find another venue to meet together and to replace the confiscated books and equipment.

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## Syria - Kurdish militia kidnap Christians to use as conscripts and mark Christian homes for confiscation

Kurdish militia in Qamishli, northern Syria, have kidnapped Christians to use as conscripts and sprayed graffiti on to Christian properties to mark them for confiscation.

Seven Christians were abducted around the town on 19 January by Kurdish security forces. Local representatives managed to negotiate the release of six of the young people

kidnapped, but at the time of writing, the whereabouts of a 20-year-old young man named Saliba is still unknown. On 31 January, two university students travelling to sit exams were abducted and Christians in the region report that teenagers have been taken from the streets.

The representatives who secured the release of six of the Christians kidnaped on 19 January were told they had been handed to the Kurdish YPG militia, which is fighting the Turkish army. One of the negotiators stated the forced conscription of young people was part of a wider pattern of intimidation by Kurdish forces who “want us to abandon our homeland so that they can seize more of our properties and land”.

Kurdish militia have also sprayed graffiti on to Christian properties, claiming that they have been “seized”, in scenes chillingly reminiscent of the 2014 targeting of Christians in Mosul, northern Iraq, by Islamic State.

One Christian, who has tried to publicise the property seizures on YouTube, said Kurdish militia “confiscated many more buildings ... They are confiscating rather than protecting our homes in the Qamishli and Hassake areas and they are even occupying entire villages ... They are treating us like second-class citizens”.

**Pray** protection for Syrian Christians in Qamishli and other towns

**“But I pray to you, Lord, in the time of your favour; in your great love, O God, answer me with your sure salvation.”**

*(Psalm 69:13)*