



Sri Lanka – Final death toll of 253 in Sri Lanka’s anti-Christian Easter attacks

“How many of you are willing to die for Christ?” said the Sunday school teachers to children of Zion Evangelical Church, Batticaloa, on Easter morning. Every child raised their hand. Minutes later, the class was over. The children spilled out to play in the church grounds while the adult congregation gathered inside for the Easter morning service. It was then that a suspicious stranger was ushered out of the building by Ramesh, a concerned church member. The stranger was a suicide bomber and detonated himself, killing at least 15 adults, including Ramesh, and 14 children who had just pledged their willingness to die for their Lord.

The wave of explosions in Sri Lanka on 21 April evidently targeted Christians on the holiest day of the Christian year. Three were in churches, and three in hotels where Christians were likely to meet for Easter breakfast after a midnight service and vigil.

Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility in a statement that made clear their main intention was to target Christians, with a secondary interest in “nationals of the coalition”.

The final death toll stands at 253 – mostly Sri Lankan Christians but including at least 38 foreigners who were in the hotels.

Roshan Mahesen, senior pastor of Zion Evangelical Church, delivered a powerful message of forgiveness, “We say to the suicide bomber, and also to the group that sent the suicide bomber, that we love you and we forgive you, no matter what you have done to us, we love you, because we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.” He then quoted Jesus Christ on the cross, who said, “Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” (Luke 23:34).

Most Sri Lankan Christians stayed at home to worship on Sunday 28 April as churches shut their doors after advice from the military and police not to gather in public. Services resumed on 19 May at the churches but some managed to meet

before this with tightened security. Zion Evangelical Church, with around 800 members, is continuing its ministry in a temporary location after its building was damaged. They have not seen any drop in church attendance as believers are keen to worship.

Bring before the Lord His beloved children in Sri Lanka who suffered such great losses on Easter Day, may they be comforted in knowing that whoever believes in Jesus will live even though they die (John 11:25-26). Give thanks for the powerful message of forgiveness from Pastor Mahesen and ask that Christians in Sri Lanka be strengthened to follow his example even as they grieve. Praise God for the courageous believers who have already begun to meet together to worship, in doing so declaring that the LORD their God is with them wherever they go (Joshua 1:9). Pray for the Lord’s protection over His people as they gather in His name.

Burkina Faso – Sixteen Christians killed in three attacks in Burkina Faso by Islamist gunmen on motorcycles

In a two-week period, Christians in northern Burkina Faso have suffered three murderous attacks at the hands of Islamist gunmen, which killed 16 Christians. In each of the attacks the gunmen arrived riding motorcycles or mopeds.

In the first attack, on 28 April in the town of Silgadji, twelve armed Islamists herded together the pastor, one of his sons, his brother-in-law, a primary school teacher and two other members of his congregation and demanded they deny their Christian faith and convert to Islam. When they refused, they were taken one-by-one behind a building where they were shot.

The pastor, who leaves a widow and six children, had experienced a vision and felt in “imminent danger”. But he told relatives he preferred to “die for his faith rather than leave the village where he has served for nearly 40 years.”

On 12 May, a gang of between 20 to 30

terrorists stormed into a Sunday church service in Dablo where they rounded up the pastor and five church leaders and shot them in cold blood. The terrorists then set fire to the church, burning its pews, the pulpit and the cross, before torching a shop in the town and looting a health centre.

“These terrorist groups are now attacking religion with the macabre aim of dividing us,” said a government statement. The mayor of Dablo said, “There is an atmosphere of panic in the town. People are holed up in their homes.”

Islamist militant gunmen launched a third murderous attack on Christians on 13 May, shooting and killing four people who were in prominent positions in a church parade in Zimtenga.

Many Christians are now afraid to go to church. “Pray for us to keep the faith because we know we may die very shortly one day,” said a Christian mother who lives in a village close to the first attack.

Intercede for our brothers and sisters in Burkina Faso who have been the target of brutal terror attacks, asking that the LORD will uphold them with His righteous right hand (Isaiah 41:10). May the 16 martyrdoms encourage others to stand firm, keep the faith and commit themselves more fully to walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. Pray that the Christians will have peace as they trust in the Lord and be able to help others not to fear and panic. Pray especially for the families of those killed that the Lord will wipe every tear from their eyes (Revelation 21:4) and provide for all their needs. Pray against the advance of Islamic extremism coming from Mali, asking the Lord to cause the terrorists to repent of their thoughts and actions.

Nepal – Christians seized by police while training pastors in Nepal

Police in Nepal arrested two Nepali Christians and two foreign nationals (a US woman and an Indian national), together with their Nepali driver, on 23 April, accusing them of trying to “lure conversions” to Christianity. A box of

Bibles, a laptop, a USB stick, cash, a nebuliser machine and a vehicle were taken from the group at a hotel in Dang district in midwestern Nepal.

The group were involved in running training courses for pastors at a local church and the Bibles were probably to be distributed among the pastors. However, police claimed that they were trying to lure people into Christianity by offering medical care and money.

The two Nepali Christians and the Indian national were held in police custody while the US woman was reportedly held under house arrest. All four faced charges under the new “anti-conversion” law of committing an act of religious conversion. The Nepali driver was released earlier.

Praise God that the four detained people were all released on 29 April after a court hearing that lasted almost all day. Throughout Nepal, Christians were overjoyed by the successful result of this case.

A new law came into force in Nepal in September 2018 that makes it an offence to “involve or encourage in conversion of religion” or “hurt religious sentiment”. While the constitution already prohibits proselytisation, the new law is very vague about what an “attempt” to convert someone might involve and means any public Christian activity is potentially illegal.

Give thanks to God for the release of the four detained Christians in Nepal (Psalm 146:7) and the encouragement this brings to the local Christian community. Pray that the government will rethink the wording of the vague “anti-conversion” law so that public Christian activity will not be prejudiced in Nepal. Pray for the continuation of pastors’ training courses and that God’s Word will be dispersed freely and spread through the whole country (Acts 13:49).

Egypt – Police order closure of church building in Egypt

About 1,500 Christian families in Mit-Nama, north of Cairo, Egypt were ordered by police on 23 April to stop holding services in a building they have been using as a church, amid reports of local Muslims being stirred up to attack it because it was not licensed for worship.

They had only recently bought the building and the closure left them with no other place to worship in the lead up to Easter Sunday on 28 April (when Orthodox Christians celebrate Easter).

Previous attempts by Christians to build a church on land they bought in 2001 had to be halted twice, once in 2001 and again in 2007, because of Muslim extremist attacks on workers at the site. The Christians remain sceptical about police assurances that construction of the new church would be allowed to go ahead provided they agree to leave their present building.

Egyptian President al-Sisi’s government has continued the process of legalising all churches and church-affiliated buildings, approving 894 applications since the process began in 2017. Progress is slow and 2,836 out of the 3,730 churches that originally applied for approval are still waiting for licences. Some church buildings were granted legal status before the new law was introduced in September 2016.

Lift up the Church in Egypt in your prayers, asking for them to wait patiently on the LORD and not to fret when attempts to delay and prevent churches being licensed appear to succeed (Psalm 37:7). May believers take heart in the words of their Saviour, “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” (Matthew 16:18). Pray for the mighty hand of the Lord to bring action to the frustrated building construction and licensing procedures.

Pakistan – Aasia Bibi and family safely resettled in Canada, and police free Pakistani Christian held for eight months on “blasphemy” charges

God has answered the prayers of many who prayed faithfully over the years for Aasia Bibi. Barnabas Fund was overjoyed on 8 May to share the news that Aasia, who was acquitted of “blasphemy” charges by the Supreme Court on 31 October 2018, had left Pakistan and safely resettled with her family in Canada. We had been aware of this news for some time, but at the request of Pakistani Christian leaders we did not publicise it for her safety and to avoid

the possibility of violence on the streets of Pakistan.

Stringent secrecy was maintained over Aasia’s whereabouts after her release from prison under government protection on 7 November 2018. The Christian mother-of-five was flown to an undisclosed place of safety in Islamabad.

The Islamist Tehreek-e-Labaik party in Pakistan had threatened to incite national disorder if Aasia was released. Widespread street protests had erupted after her acquittal, with hard-line Islamists calling for her execution. Thankfully, prayers for peace have been answered and there have been no reports of street violence on Aasia’s release.

In early May, we received news of another wonderful answer to prayer from Pakistan. Police declared Christian Farhan Aziz, 25, innocent of “blasphemy” and released him after eight months in custody. However, it may never be safe for Farhan to return home because of the threat from the local Muslim community.

Farhan, from Muslim Town, Gujranwala was arrested on 2 August 2018 and falsely accused of sending “blasphemous” text messages, which he denied. He was charged under 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code, which carries a mandatory death sentence.

CLAAS (Centre for Legal Aid, Assistance and Settlement) said, “It is sad that Farhan has spent months in police custody for a crime he never committed, but good news that he is free now. But many victims of the blasphemy law spend years in prison and there is no hope for them.”

Praise God that Aasia Bibi and her family have resettled safely in Canada. Pray that the LORD will restore the years that the locusts have taken from this family (Joel 2:25) enabling them now to live peacefully, undisturbed and secure in their new home (Isaiah 32:18). Give thanks to God that there has been no disorder on the streets of Pakistan and no attacks on Christians since Aasia’s release. Praise God also for Farhan’s release from custody. Pray for a safe place for him to live and work. Pray that other victims of the “blasphemy” law who remain in prison will be strengthened by these answered prayers as they wait on the Lord for their deliverance.

For with God nothing shall be impossible. - Luke 1:37 (KJV)

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