



Persecution & Prayer Alert

The Voice of the Martyrs Canada
www.vomcanada.com

Thursday, January 20, 2022

*"God, who foresaw your tribulation,
has specially armed you to go through it,
not without pain, but without stain."*

~ C.S. Lewis

PAKISTAN: Christian Girls Abducted

Sources: Agenzia Fides, Info Chrétienne, Kross Konnection, Morning Star News

At least four Pakistani Christian girls have been kidnapped in the first two weeks of 2022, continuing a trend that has become increasingly prevalent across the country. In many cases, the abducted girls are forcibly converted to Islam, married to their kidnappers, and then held in captivity -- an outcome justified by fraudulent marriage and conversion certificates. To read about previous instances, go to www.vomcanada.com/pakistan.htm.

In one recent case of abduction, an unnamed 16-year-old girl faced repeated harassment through text messages and phone calls, as 30-year-old Muhammad Arif tried to convince her to have sex with him. When the Christian teenager continued to refuse, she was kidnapped on January 7th by Arif and two other men, who took her from Okara, Punjab, to Faisalabad. There, she was repeatedly raped until the men finally released her. Due to the physical and psychological trauma she endured, the teen has been unable to speak about the situation. Her family has since filed a complaint and arrests of the perpetrators have been made.

A human rights activist named Ashiknaz Khokhar laments the distressing increase in the number of attacks against girls belonging to religious minorities and the abuses these victims are forced to endure. In this case, he is thankful for the swift response of the authorities: "We appreciate the police for their quick response and action in arresting the perpetrators of violence against a Christian teenager. It is essential to break the culture of impunity."

For 14-year-old Mahnoor Ashraf and her family, however, the devastating situation is ongoing. On the morning of January 4th, the Christian teenager journeyed from her home in Lahore to a

local store with her young nephew. When he returned alone, the boy explained to the family that some people had taken Mahnoor. After investigating the case further, they discovered that she had been abducted by their neighbour, Muhammad Ali Khan Ghauri, and his three accomplices.

When the family went to confront Muhammad, they discovered that the married 45-year-old father of two was missing. Three days later, his family informed Mahnoor's parents that their daughter had converted to Islam and married her kidnapper. The family is pushing to have charges laid against all those involved, including Muhammad Ibrar, who solemnized the marriage despite knowing that Mahnoor was a minor. In order to justify the marriage, the certificate fraudulently indicated her age as 19.

The family understands that Mahnoor may have been pressured into a relationship with Muhammad Ghauri and, as a result, ultimately complied with him on her own accord. However, the courts rarely investigate whether declarations of consent are truly voluntary or the result of threats, psychological abuse and conditioning, or fear of social stigma. Furthermore, Mahnoor is a minor who is legally unable to marry. Though Pakistani law states that intercourse with any girl under 16 years of age is rape and thereby punishable by death, the courts have repeatedly upheld marriages to underaged girls because Islamic law holds that marriage is allowed once puberty is reached.

Please pray for the healing of the 16-year-old girl from Punjab, as she now tries to cope with the aftermath of the trauma, asking the "God of all comfort" to provide her greatly needed peace, as well as strength to overcome (2 Corinthians 1:3). Also pray for 14-year-old Mahnoor and the many other impressionable Pakistani girls who have been forced or coerced into abusive relationships, and yet are still being held captive by their abusers. Also prayerfully uphold the distraught families of these victimized teens as they seek to understand how to best support their daughters in the midst of this struggle. May the perpetrators responsible in each case be held legally accountable, and may the courts rightfully uphold laws that are intended to protect Pakistan's vulnerable young women and girls.

LIBYA: Warnings Against Christmas Celebrations

Source: Middle East Concern

A recent government campaign against the celebration of Christmas is yet another demonstration of anti-Christian activity orchestrated by the authorities in the North African nation of Libya. A movement to confiscate Christmas decorations from stores was lauded by governing officials on the national news agency. In one city, local police shut down all stores that were selling the seasonal decorations.

In a bizarre twist, the Ministry of Interior issued a warning for all Libyan citizens, mandating that they are not to "celebrate Christmas on New Year's Eve" -- a practice the authorities presumably believe is customary for those affiliated with Christianity. Police also warned against participating in any Christmas and New Year's celebration, claiming that such festivities are not representative of the country's religion or beliefs. In at least two separate incidents, followers of

Christ were arrested as they celebrated the new year. For more reports addressing the difficulties facing Christians in Libya, go to www.vomcanada.com/libya.htm.

Pray that as Christians in Libya endeavour to live out their faith in a culture opposed to their beliefs, they will be endowed with the grace, wisdom and courage required to respond to these recent governmental warnings in a manner that brings honour to the wonderful God they serve. May these brothers and sisters in Christ seek His guidance for ways in which they can proactively love, bless and pray for their persecutors. Finally, pray that the country's governing authorities will gain an understanding of the various cultural and religious differences among the Libyan people and, as a result, strive to govern in a way that respects the freedom of all citizens.

REPORT UPDATES

NEPAL: Pastor Released on Bail Pending Appeal

Source: Church in Chains

In November 2021, Pastor Keshav Raj Acharya of the Abundant Harvest Church in Pokhara, Nepal, was convicted of proselytising and thus sentenced to two years in prison. He was initially arrested because of a video that had been released without his knowledge in which he claimed that the COVID-19 virus could be healed through prayer. He was later re-arrested for "outraging religious feelings" and "attempting to convert" others to Christianity. (To review a previously posted report on this case, go to www.vomcanada.com/np-2021-12-02.htm.)

During the sentencing hearing, Pastor Keshav's lawyer argued that the proper legal process was not followed, adding that the court's decision would be appealed. On December 19th, after it was announced that bail had been granted to the pastor pending the appeal, he was able to arrive home on Christmas Eve.

Praise God that Pastor Keshav has been released on bail in the interim, while patiently awaiting the outcome of his appeal. Pray that it will be successful so all the charges against him may be dropped. Even in the midst of this difficult waiting period, may he remain in peace, seizing this time as an opportunity for the grace of God to be demonstrated to all who are involved in his case.

CHINA: Church Members Sentenced to Prison

Sources: ChinaAid, UCA News

The Xuncheng Reformed Church in Taiyuan, China, has faced numerous raids over the past year. On December 30th, 2020, while Pastor An Yankui was hosting a Bible study in his home, security officers raided the house and forcefully restrained him (see www.vomcanada.com/cn-2021-01-14.htm). During his detainment, the pastor served a 15-day administrative detention.

Moreover, in May 2021, police officers raided the home of Zhao Weikai, another leader of the church, confiscating his computer equipment and books (www.vomcanada.com/cn-2021-05-27.htm). As documentaries were found in his home about the Tiananmen Square massacre and the 2009 Xinjiang riots, Zhao was officially arrested in July and charged with the "illegal holding of materials promoting terrorism and extremism" (www.vomcanada.com/cn-2021-08-05.htm).

Further pressure was placed on this Christian community when Chinese officials charged five members of the church and arrested two others (including Pastor An Yankui) on accusations of "illegally crossing the national border." The charges relate to a conference attended in Kuala Lumpur during January 2020. This conference was hosted by Pastor Stephen Tong Tjong Eng, who has been openly critical of the Chinese Communist Party because of its religious persecution.

Even though all those attending the conference had legally obtained passports and visas to travel, officials fabricated charges against them in July 2021. Recently, on January 7th, the Fenyang Court sentenced Zhang Ligong, Wang Runyun, Wang Shiqiang, Zhang Yaowen and Song Shoushan to terms ranging from six to eight months' imprisonment.

In addition to these sentences, the same charges were added to the list of offenses against Pastor An Yankui and Zhang Chenghao. While these church leaders were detained in November 2021, they were formally arrested on December 29th. The two Christian men are presently being held at the Xiaoyi City Detention Centre.

Pray for increased endurance, boldness and patience on behalf the mentioned church members who are being unjustly detained. May they sense anew the refreshing presence of God surrounding them and, subsequently, find rest in His grace and strength through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, prayerfully remember the concerned families of these detained Christians, as well as other members of the church who are sharing their concerns, asking that each of these believers will also experience the peace of God that surpasses all understanding as they await with hopeful anticipation for their loved ones' release.

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