



Persecution & Prayer Alert

The Voice of the Martyrs Canada
www.vomcanada.com

Thursday, December 28, 2023

***"The message of the Gospel
is for Jesus, so don't fail to
preach it because of fear.
Preach it, whether they like
it or not. Just deliver it."***

~ Nigerian Pastor Joshua Amako Maraya
who was killed in November 2023

For more than 50 years, The Voice of the Martyrs Canada has been following reports of persecution around the world and calling on Christians to pray. For the past 20 of those years, the *Persecution & Prayer Alert* reports have been made available on the ministry's website. Simply go to www.vomcanada.com/global-persecution.htm and either click a country on the map or select one from the drop-down list. The profiles contain suggestions on how you can effectively pray. You can also download a printable prayer map as a helpful tool.

This concluding *Persecution & Prayer Alert* for 2023 features the five most reported countries, based on the reports VOMC has published during the past 12 months. While Christians in each of the following countries face immense pressure because of their faith, this does not necessarily mean these listed countries represent areas where the persecution of believers is most intense. Unfortunately, in far too many cases, restrictions on communication in the world's most volatile countries prevent situations of hostility from being exposed.

CHINA

At least once each month, reports have revealed the various ways in which officials of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) attempt to control the church in China and further their socialist agenda. By implementing the policy of "Sinicization," the country's political leadership demands that all teachings be presented within a Chinese context, as defined by the CCP. These messages must reflect the CCP's political stance and the values of President Xi Jinping.

Religious symbols are forbidden from being posted outdoors, yet the Chinese flag and a photo of President Xi must be displayed in a prominent place of each church. The government's agenda has also been infiltrating the homes of its citizens, for children are not allowed to be taught about the Christian faith. Multiple arrests of believers have taken place relating to the education of their children.

Pastors and other leaders from house churches have been particularly targeted, resulting in government surveillance, arrest, interrogation, imprisonment, and other forms of harassment. Sometimes those detained are interrogated and released; others are confined for months without trial. The charges against them range from "picking quarrels" to "illegal business practices" or "organizing illegal gatherings."

Some congregations have been subjected to repeated harassment, such as those affiliated with the Early Rain Covenant Church, the Golden Lampstand Church and the Ren'ai Reformed Church. The persecution may involve a violent raid during a worship service, as was experienced by congregants on March 12th (www.vomcanada.com/cn-2023-03-16.htm). While officers manhandled the worshippers, the church choir continued to sing the hymn, *Near the Cross*. Along with the arrests of attending members, there have also been increasing incidents in which landlords were pressured by the government to evict specifically targeted Christians, forcing them and their families to move from their homes.

In keeping with God's promises to even work through life's most difficult situations, imprisoned church leaders seized the ministry opportunities presented to them within the confines of their prison cells. One example of such dedication to the Lord's call to ministry was demonstrated by Pastor Geng Zejun, whose "congregation" included fellow inmates. During his incarceration, he gained the respect of both fellow prisoners and prison wardens who personally sought his counsel and ministry (www.vomcanada.com/cn-2023-02-09.htm).

Thankfully, at least two pastors who served several years in prison were released during the spring of 2023. Alimujiang Yimiti, a pastor and member of the oppressed Uyghur people, was released after serving 15 years in prison! Another church leader, 68-year-old Hu Shigen, was released after more than seven years. And this was not the elderly leader's only incarceration. In total, Hu Shigen has endured over 24 years of imprisonment for his faithful Gospel work. These are just a few examples of the many reports received through our ministry partners. For more information, and/or to view a full list of reports, go to www.vomcanada.com/china.htm.

Praise God for His ongoing work in the nation of China, where it has been clearly demonstrated that 'the gates of hell will not prevail against Christ's church' (Matthew 16:18). Please prayerfully uphold the many believers presently remaining in prison, and their loved ones, as they endure this difficult time of separation. Despite the government's opposition, may our Chinese brothers and sisters in Christ continue with their ministry work – raising up disciples throughout the nation in the process – so that many others in China will hear the Gospel message and become an integral part of God's Kingdom.

PAKISTAN

Religious minorities in the predominantly Muslim nation of Pakistan are frequently looked down upon and treated with contempt by opposing community members. Persecution reports have generally fallen into one of the following two categories: 1) believers accused of blasphemy; and 2) Christian girls and young women who were abducted and forcibly married to Muslim men.

Numerous reports have been published outlining the injustices experienced by the concerned families of Christian girls and young women who were kidnapped, raped, forced to convert to Islam, and then married off to their captors. As the families of these vulnerable victims are generally very poor and considered to be of low societal status, support from the courts and community members in such cases is far too often minimal.

In two disturbing incidents, the kidnapping escalated to murder. In June, a Christian widow and mother of three was abducted, raped, doused with acid and murdered – all for merely refusing the advances of a local man who wanted her to convert to Islam and marry him. In December 2022, a 12-year-old girl named Hoorab was kidnapped. After her captors were discovered and brought to court, Hoorab's father, Basharat, was killed on April 24th. It is believed that Basharat's murder was perpetrated by those seeking revenge for his attempts to bring his daughter's captors to justice (www.vomcanada.com/pk-2023-05-04b.htm).

For many years, blasphemy accusations have been used as an easy way for unscrupulous individuals to seek revenge against Christians during personal or business disagreements. Such accusations can quickly spread to the point of instigating the wrath of frenzied rioters who react by committing devastating acts of violence and destruction. Not only were the accused believers and their families at risk, so were the lives of the individuals who tried to justly defend them. This has resulted in increased challenges for those seeking justice within the country's legal system.

In June, a Scripture verse was posted on Facebook by a Christian, sparking the outrage of militant Muslims against all believers in general. Due to the uncontrollable mob violence, hundreds of Christians were forced to flee for their lives (www.vomcanada.com/pakistan/pk-2023-07-06b.htm). Two months later, after allegations were made that two Christian brothers had been burning pages of the Quran, thousands of angry rioters stormed a Christian colony in Jaranwala. Numerous churches and homes were destroyed in the attacks, leaving so many innocent victims grief-stricken and destitute. A video report on the latter incident may be viewed at www.vomcanada.com/pk-videos/video/pk-attacks-23-08.htm.

When reviewing other reports of the past year, it appears that Pakistan's courts have been more careful when examining evidence relating to blasphemy cases. In an incident that occurred this September, a couple was charged because a bystander in their community noticed papers containing Quranic verses blowing from a rooftop. The accused believers were released a month later due to the lack of evidence. In a previous case that took place in January, an airport security officer was accused of blasphemy simply for doing her job by restricting entrance to a secure location. All the accusations made against the officer were quickly dismissed after the facts were determined. To read this year's 25 reports relating to the country of Pakistan, along with those of previous years, go to www.vomcanada.com/pakistan.htm.

Please pray for Christians in Pakistan who are courageously persevering in their faith amid such a harsh environment, including those who are presently imprisoned because of the false accusations made against them. Also intercede for believers who have been acquitted, but yet still face hostility from the spiritually opposing members of their communities. May God mightily intervene in this South Asian nation, bringing about an atmosphere of tolerance and unity, while also leading court and legislative officials to act justly on behalf of all Pakistan's citizens. Last, but not least, remember our suffering sisters in Christ who have been forcibly "married" to their abusers, asking the Lord to encourage, comfort and strengthen each one of them through the many assuring promises in His Word, an increased awareness of His divine presence, and a greater sense of His sustaining grace.

NIGERIA

As the most populous nation in Africa, Nigeria has a democratically elected government with religious freedoms engrained in the constitution. Even so, this country remains divided according to the overall religious affiliation of the representing populations: the northern part of the country, which is predominantly Muslim; and the southern half where the majority claim to be Christian.

Reports indicate that much of the violence targeting Christians was committed by members of militant Islamic groups within the country. Terrorist groups, such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), have been working to establish an Islamic state. In recent years, however, violence by the country's Fulani herdsmen has grown to be a major influence.

The Fulani are traditionally a nomadic people who herd livestock across the region, often without any regard for those living in these areas. There were times when the violent conflicts had taken place over the grazing of land. Yet, when the militant Islamic ideologies within some Fulani groups became a factor, Christian communities were threatened with even further challenges.

Raids committed by armed Fulani bandits, specifically those targeting churches and the homes of congregation members, have devastated entire communities. Along with the killing and pillaging, the Fulani militants also captured hostages during the raids with the intention of having them ransomed. As these raids spread further south in Nigeria, hundreds of Christians have been killed or kidnapped. A particularly devastating series of attacks happened recently between December 24th and the 26th when at least 140 people were killed in multiple villages of the country's Plateau State. More details may be released in future alerts as additional reports become available.

Over the years, incidents involving the kidnapping of school students have also been devastating for the country's Christians. More than five years ago, a girls' school in Dapchi was raided. Of the 110 students kidnapped, only one of them, Leah Sharibu, remains missing. Leah's family continues to call for those around the world to pray for their teen's release from captivity and for the Nigerian government to advocate on her behalf.

In a separate incident, which took place in 2014, a total of 276 girls were abducted from a school in Chibok. Approximately 100 of them are still missing. Thankfully, the families of Huwa Maltha and Ester Marcus were joyfully reunited following their girls' rescue in April. This year also marked the final student to be welcomed home of those who had been kidnapped at the Bethel Baptist High School in July 2021. For an overview of all the Nigeria reports posted by VOMC during the year of 2023 and beyond, go to www.vomcanada.com/nigeria.htm.

Praise God for the safe return of believers who had been kidnapped in Nigeria, as they now can enjoy being joyously reunited with their families and friends. In the meantime, please continue to pray for the hundreds of others who are suffering from the aftermath of the violent raids – specifically those whose loved ones have been killed or remain in captivity, as well as followers of Jesus who have lost their homes, businesses and churches for their faith in Him. May they too receive greatly needed comfort, healing, peace, restoration, protection and provision.... Overall, pray that the Holy Spirit will work miraculously throughout the entire nation of Nigeria, bringing the hope of the Gospel message to all who are in desperate need of God's forgiveness and eternal salvation.

INDONESIA

Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world. While freedom of religion is guaranteed in the constitution, Muslims generally receive preferential treatment from the government. In order to establish and operate places of worship, permits are officially required; yet, in practise, only non-Muslims must comply. These permits are very difficult for churches to obtain. To be granted an official permit, each congregation must be comprised of a minimum of 90 members and needs authorization from at least 60 non-Christian residents in the area.

Conflicts about worship services dominate many of the reports coming from Indonesia. Because of the restrictive nature of the permit process, churches will frequently gather without a permit, which can bring about conflict with opposing neighbours. Even for small groups of believers gathering in a home – something that is officially permitted by the government – there may be demands placed upon them to obtain a permit.

In an incident that took place this February, a local village official violently demanded that a church service stop, claiming that the congregation did not have a permit. Due to the nature of the attack, the official was charged and convicted for his assault, and the church was issued a temporary permit while working through the arduous process of obtaining permanent governmental approval.

For the Yasmin Church in Bogor, the permit process was a long time coming. Initially approved in 2006, the church encountered numerous delays due to opposition from some of the Muslim residents. Although the permit took more than 15 years to obtain, along with a forced relocation, the church finally opened on Easter Sunday with several politicians in attendance.

Various levels of government have tried to change the image of the country. In 2022, when the country's Muslim president attended a Christmas Day service, he called for peace between religions. Additionally, the mayor of Bogor took part in the inauguration of the Yasmin Church,

despite years of opposition from local officials. While these political leaders' actions can be viewed as examples of religious tolerance, the ongoing opposition of others at the local level continues to impede any progress towards religious freedom. For more details on these reports, and others relating to Indonesia, go to www.vomcanada.com/indonesia.htm.

Prayerfully remember Indonesian Christians who continue to gather together for worship, despite the opposition they encounter from disagreeing local officials. Pray that these believers will receive the Lord's wisdom, direction and favour as they determine how to best navigate through the confusing and obstructive regulations in order to obtain permanent permits. In the midst of the political challenges, and opposition from community members, may Christians throughout this Southeast Asian country serve as examples of God's love and saving grace to their neighbours, so many more names may be added to the Lamb's "Book of Life."

INDIA

This year started and ended with reports about Christians who were detained in the state of Uttar Pradesh due to its anti-conversion legislation. This is one of the 12 Indian states that has laws regulating religious conversions, with increasing political pressure being placed on the country's government to enact the legislation nationally. While regulations protecting people from religious conversions by force or deception may be beneficial, the regulations are often misused by individuals and officials as a way of stopping any religious activity they personally oppose.

On January 2nd, accusations of coercion led to a violent confrontation at a Catholic church in Chahattigarh. Significant damage was made to the church building, and several police officers were injured while attempting to intervene. Christians have also been accused when conducting small gatherings in their homes. In early June, a group of militants disrupted a family gathering, resulting in the arrests of five Christians. Thankfully, those who had been arrested were eventually released on bail.

In a positive development, following elections that took place in the state of Karnataka this past May, action has begun to repeal the state's anti-conversion laws. This move has been strongly opposed by the BJP – a political party with strong Hindu-nationalist leanings. Even so, a recently made court ruling in the state of Uttar Pradesh may help to further mitigate the effects of the state's future laws. The judge ruled that "accusations of alluring people to convert" can only be filed by the person being allegedly targeted or by a family member of that person. He also provided some legal guidelines on what constitutes "allurement." For more details about this court ruling, go to www.vomcanada.com/in-2023-11-09.htm.

Known as the most populous nation in the world, India is officially a secular country guided by a constitution that guarantees religious freedom. However, the process of ensuring that this freedom is respected has proven to be a difficult task in a country where there is strong pressure to establish India officially as a Hindu nation. For more reports on India, and/or to view podcasts addressing Christian persecution in this country, go to www.vomcanada.com/india.htm.

Prayerfully uphold the many Christians in India who are facing serious threats to their freedoms, securities and safeties because of their faith in Christ. May believers throughout this nation receive the spiritual strength required to stand firm in the midst of extreme opposition and brightly shine His light in the darkness. Please also remember the ongoing ministry work of those who are boldly reaching out to others with the "Good News" of Jesus. May any further threats from their opponents not stop the proclamation of the Gospel, but rather serve as the catalyst for leading many more to faith in the "Prince of Peace."

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