

## NIGERIA

### CHRISTIANS FLEE FROM NORTH AS DEADLY ATTACKS CONTINUE

Hundreds of Christians are leaving their homes in the mainly Muslim North of Nigeria following a New Year ultimatum from militant Islamist group Boko Haram for Christians to quit the North and subsequent attacks against them.

Entire lorry-loads of Christians are said to be leaving Yobe, where twelve Christian men and one woman were reportedly shot dead in Potiskum town between 10 and 11 January. Christians are also leaving Maiduguri, Boko Haram's spiritual homeland in Borno State, following attacks against them there.

The terrorist group executed a series of coordinated bomb and gun attacks on churches and the security services, killing more than 40 people in five states on Christmas Day, 25 December 2011. Around 35 worshippers were killed as explosives were hurled at the congregation as they left the service at a church in Madalla, near the Nigerian capital, Abuja.

Soon after the expiry of the ultimatum, gunmen stormed a church in Gombe, capital of Gombe State, on 5 January 2012, during a prayer meeting, killing at least eight Christians. Pastor Johnson Jauro said, "I was leading the congregation in prayers. Our eyes were closed when some gunmen stormed the church and opened fire on the congregation. The attackers started shooting sporadically. They shot through the window of the church, and many people were killed including my wife." The next day, around 20 Christians were gunned down in Mubi, Adamawa state, as they gathered to mourn the death of another Christian who had been killed the night before. A Boko Haram spokesman has claimed responsibility for some attacks.

The head of the Christian Association of Nigeria, Ayo Oritsejafor, said on Saturday 7 January that the intensifying anti-Christian killings in Nigeria suggest "systematic ethnic and religious cleansing". The violence prompted President Goodluck Jonathan to declare a state of emergency in the most troubled areas.

- *Pray that the Lord will comfort those who have lost loved ones in the violent attacks, and that they will respond in a Christ-like way.*
- *Pray for families who have been forced to flee the violence; ask the Lord to be the shelter that they need (Isaiah 25:4).*
- *Pray for protection for Christians in Nigeria from the brutal violence and religious cleansing wrought by Boko Haram, which they have had to endure for so long.*

## AZERBAIJAN

### PASTOR FACING CRIMINAL CHARGES FOLLOWING CHURCH RAID

Pastor Telman Aliev has been threatened with criminal proceedings following a raid on his church in Neftechala, Azerbaijan. The raid took place during the service on Sunday 11 December.

Those present were questioned and then told that the church, which has been unable to re-register with the state for over a decade, was closed; the officials took the keys and sealed the building, though it was later re-opened. One official said, "Without registration you can't pray. We close any place of worship that isn't registered." They seized around 200 pieces of literature, including Bibles and magazines, as well as audio and video recordings, for vetting by the state committee that carries out Azerbaijan's compulsory censorship of all religious literature.

On 23 December, the pastor, his wife and all church members were summoned for police questioning. The pastor had earlier been told that "a criminal case had been launched over religious literature arousing incitement over other faiths".

Amendments to the country's Criminal and Administrative Codes that create new penalties or increase the severity of existing punishments for a range of religious activities came into force on 12 December. These include the introduction of a prison term of up to five years for those who produce or distribute religious literature that has not been vetted by the state (see December 2011 *Prayer Focus Update*).

- *Pray that the authorities will drop the criminal charges against Pastor*

*Aliev and grant registration to the church so that the congregation can meet for worship without fear of further raids.*

## UGANDA

### ACID ATTACK ON CONVERT PASTOR

Pastor Umar Mulinde had acid thrown in his face and on his back outside his church in Kampala, Uganda, on 24 December 2011. The substance caused burns to the right side of his face, neck and arms, and partially blinded his right eye.

The attack occurred in the church car park, shortly after the conclusion of a seven-day evangelistic campaign. Pastor Umar later testified, "I was attacked by a man who claimed to be a Christian. He called out to me shouting 'pastor, pastor', and as I turned to see who he was, he poured acid which burnt part of my face. As I turned away from the attacker, another man poured the liquid on my back and ran away shouting 'Allah Akbar [god is great].'" The pastor was quickly rushed to a hospital in Kampala by church members.

Pastor Umar, a convert from Islam and former sheikh, had been receiving threats for some time; it is believed that he was targeted because of his conversion to Christianity and strong criticism of the Islamic faith. The 38-year-old father of six had also been a key opponent of Muslim plans to introduce Kadhi courts (sharia courts) in Uganda.

Pastor Umar was moved to a medical centre in Israel on 5 January, after it was decided that he needed more advanced treatment. In an update from his hospital bed on 25 January, Pastor Umar said that he is still in pain, having had two skin-graft operations on his face. Treatment is continuing on his right eye, which was severely damaged. Barnabas Fund is assisting with the costs of surgery.

- *Pray that Pastor Umar will know the Lord's comfort in his pain and that he will be healed from the physical and emotional trauma of his ordeal.*
- *Pray for his attackers, that they may come to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour, and that they will repent of their actions.*

## SYRIA

### CHRISTIANS TARGETED IN SERIES OF KIDNAPPINGS AND KILLINGS

Around 100 Christians have been killed since the anti-government unrest began.

Children are being especially targeted by the kidnappers, who, if they do not receive the ransom demanded, kill the victim. Two Christian men, one aged 28, the other a 37-year-old father with a pregnant wife, were kidnapped by the rebels in separate incidents and later found dead: the first was found hanged with numerous injuries; the second was cut into pieces and thrown in a river. Four more have been abducted, and their captors are threatening to kill them too.

On 15 January two Christians were killed as they waited for bread at a bakery. Another Christian, aged 40 with two young children, was shot dead by three armed attackers while he was driving a vehicle.

These latest reports recall the anti-Christian attacks that have become commonplace in Iraq since the 2003 US-led invasion, and heighten concerns about the future for Christians in Syria as the anti-government protests there continue.

- *Pray for our brothers and sisters in Syria, that they will know the Lord's peace at this tumultuous time, and pray particularly for all those who have been bereaved in the ongoing conflict.*
- *Pray that the Lord will be a strong presence in Syria and that He will protect His people. Pray too that Western governments will have wisdom and insight as they consider what to do.*

## LAOS

### CHRISTIAN FAMILIES ORDERED TO RENOUNCE FAITH OR LEAVE VILLAGE

Christians in Natoo village, Palansai district, Savannakhet province, Laos, were told by village officials, "If you want to live in our village, you must cease all beliefs and practices in the Christian faith."

The heads of the four Christian families were summoned to a meeting with the village authorities on 21 December and told that all 47 Christians living in the village must give up their faith in Christ and cease all Sunday worship meetings. Natoo village church was formed two years ago, and Christians hold weekly worship services in the home of the church leader, Mr Sompu.

Natoo is approximately five kilometres from Boukham village, where eight church leaders were arrested in December 2011 for holding a Christmas celebration. One of the detainees was set free, but on 27 December the other seven had their legs clamped in a long wooden plank. They were each ordered to pay a fine of US\$125 (£80; €95) and a cow (worth US\$600; £385; €458) for violating the traditional cult of the village, but they denied the charges and refused to pay. After the intervention of higher authorities the fine was reduced to just US\$125 each and the leaders were finally set free on 12 January 2012.

The Lao constitution protects freedom of religion, but implementation of this right at a local level can be arbitrary.

- *Pray for the Christian families of Natoo village who are living under threat of being forced from their village. Pray that the Lord will intervene and the families will be allowed to remain in their homes and continue to practise their faith.*
- *Give thanks that the church leaders from Boukham village were released. Pray that all believers in Laos will stand firm in their faith, despite the persecution they face.*
- *Pray that the Lao constitution will be upheld by all village authorities.*

## PAKISTAN

### AUTHORITIES DEMOLISH CHRISTIAN WELFARE CENTRE

A Christian welfare centre in Lahore, Pakistan, was bulldozed on 10 January, leaving two Christian families homeless.

The families were ordered out as the machinery was moved in by the Lahore Development Authority, flanked by a heavy police presence. The compound's church, houses and other property, including a cross and Bibles, were destroyed.

The two-acre property, worth billions of rupees, was registered as the Lahore Charitable Association and belonged to the local church. It had previously been used as a home for the elderly and a girls' school. Lahore officials said that the property had been transferred to the Punjab government and notices had been served to vacate it, but Christian leaders said the Punjab government had acted illegally and no notice had been served.

In December, Khurram Masih (25) from Lahore was arrested for blasphemy, after it was alleged that he

had burnt pages from the Quran. An angry mob of around 1,000 Muslims had blocked a road in Shahdara for three hours demanding his arrest; they damaged several vehicles and ransacked the local police station. At a court hearing on 3 January, Khurram was denied bail.

The "blasphemy laws" are often used against Christians and other non-Muslims in Pakistan; thousands of innocent people have been falsely accused of the offence without proof.

- *Pray that the families who were forced out of the Christian centre in Lahore will find places to stay. Pray that the authorities will provide them with a new place to meet for worship.*
- *Khurram had been married for just three months at the time of his arrest; pray for strength and comfort for him and his new wife, and that he will soon be released from prison and all charges dropped. He has been tortured and beaten.*

## EGYPT

### CONTINUE TO PRAY DURING FURTHER ELECTIONS

Elections for the Egyptian upper house of parliament, the Shura Council, started on 29 January, following the announcement on 21 January of the final results for the lower house, the People's Assembly.

As expected from the first two rounds of voting, the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) emerged with the largest share of the vote, obtaining 47% of the seats in the People's Assembly. The hard line Salafist al-Nur party's coalition came second, taking about 25% of the seats.

- *Pray that as Egyptians go to the polls again to elect the Shura Council the Lord will guide the result according to His purposes. Pray that the rights of Christians and other minorities in Egypt will be upheld by the new parliament and that the implementation of hard-line Islamist policies will be restrained.*
- *Ask the Lord to rule over the country's new parliament and to encourage all His people in that land; pray that they will be treated justly.*

**ASK AND IT WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU; SEEK AND YOU WILL FIND; KNOCK AND THE DOOR WILL BE OPENED TO YOU (MATTHEW 7:7, NIV).**