

# Fleeing for their lives - and left homeless

*"When will they come to kill us, Daddy?"*

asked the children of an Egyptian Christian leader as the family faced growing uncertainty during the revolution in February 2011. The Christian community in Egypt found themselves under threat as the political uprising brought increased instability. Fearing for their safety, Christian families living in mainly Muslim villages fled their homes.

An entire Christian village in Kaduna State, Nigeria, was burned to ashes by a mob of 300 Muslim militants on 18 April 2011. The attackers arrived armed with various weapons and torched the village as the Christians ran for their lives.

Sadly these events are not unusual in countries where Christians are a vulnerable, despised and persecuted minority. Rumours or small disagreements can lead to mob rampages; homes and businesses owned by Christians may be torched and Christians beaten and even murdered to settle disputes. The Christian community is often associated with the "Christian" West, so members of the majority religion take out their anger against the West on the nearest available substitute – their Christian neighbours. Western military initiatives in the Muslim world, or individual actions such as the burning of a Quran far away in the USA, can result in a violent backlash against local Christians in Muslim countries. Sometimes the violence is spontaneous, but other times it appears to have been planned and deliberately stirred up.

In addition to such persecution, factors such as war and natural disasters, or even persecution by their own relatives, can force Christians to flee.

## War and civil unrest

Christians are often caught up in civil war and fighting when their country is in a state of political upheaval. In Gaza and the West Bank, Christians are caught in the middle of a conflict not of their making. This, together with other pressures, has caused many to emigrate.

Decades of civil war ripped the country of Sudan apart and left some five million people homeless as the government attempted to impose Islamic sharia law on

the mainly Christian South. Churches and homes were demolished, and there were reports of kidnappings, forced labour and massacres. Displaced people from the South fled to the largely Islamic North.

In January 2011, the South of Sudan voted overwhelmingly for independence, which became reality on 9 July. But fighting and "ethnic cleansing" in the disputed border region blighted the run-up to independence, forcing thousands of people, including Christians, from their homes and creating a humanitarian crisis. Troops and tanks of the Khartoum government in the mainly Muslim North overran the contested Abyei region, causing more than 110,000 people to flee to the south, where the majority are living in unsheltered and basic conditions.

But it is not only ethnic tension that produces national division, leaving Christians homeless. As demonstrations against the Syrian government intensified in 2011, Christians came under increasing pressure to join the uprising. In the village of

Hala, Muslim residents issued an ultimatum to their Christian neighbours either to join the demonstrations against President Bashar al-Assad's regime or to leave.

## Government-sponsored action

In some countries, Christians suffer for their faith at the hands of the government, military, police and justice systems. Secular regimes such as the one in Burma (Myanmar) may use the majority faith as an ally in the oppression of their Christian community. Most Christians are members of the non-Burman ethnic minorities. They are treated by the ruling military junta as if they were enemies of the state. The army will attack the mountain villages that are home to the Christians, killing any inhabitants who do not manage to escape in time. They then set fire to the villages or plant landmines around the homes and the bodies to kill anyone who tries to return. Those who run end up camping in the surrounding jungle, and many die there from snake bites, disease or starvation.



Thousands of people, mainly Christians, fled from decades of fighting in Sudan and lived in extremely basic refugee camps



Christian villagers in Burma (Myanmar) flee from persecution on foot, taking only what they can carry

### Family persecution

Many Christians experience persecution from their families when they choose to follow Christ. In Central Asia, "Alima" was told by her mother-in-law that when her husband died, she would be turned out of her house unless she renounced her Christian faith and returned to Islam, the faith into which she had been born. She refused, and she and her five children found themselves without a roof over their heads.

### Natural disasters

Where Christians are in the minority, they may suffer disproportionately when natural disasters occur. Poverty often leaves Christians living in homes that are poorly constructed and therefore even more vulnerable to destruction. In countries where Christians are despised, rejected and persecuted, they may be neglected in the distribution of aid, including the provision of materials to help them to rebuild their homes and lives.

Many Pakistani Christian families had their homes completely destroyed in the terrible floods of August 2010. After water poured into his lifelong home, Joseph Bashir said, "On my present salary, even in 50 years I cannot rebuild by house." Younis Masih had built his home with his own hands over 25 years. Tragically, the house collapsed under the strain of the gushing waters.

### Barnabas working to rehome the homeless

In the Bible God is presented as the refuge of His poor and needy people, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat

(Isaiah 25:4), and this protection is part of His provision for them in the age to come (Isaiah 4:5-6). But the Bible also tells us that we have a responsibility to provide for other members of God's family who do not have a roof over their heads (Isaiah 58:7), including those who are persecuted for their faith.

Barnabas Fund provides emergency funding when our Lord's family find themselves displaced, homeless and struggling to survive. As well as feeding programmes and education projects, we have also provided emergency funding for families in Nigeria who have had to leave their homes following horrific anti-Christian violence, and in Iraq we have financed the construction of 40 apartments for Christians who have sought security in the north of the country.

In Central Asia, Barnabas funded the purchase of a new home for "Alima" (see above). The house has four rooms, a kitchen, a bathhouse and a vegetable garden, and the family can keep livestock. A report received from the pastor of her church said, "The family is very happy and rejoice because they have their own house and they thank you very much for this. It is as a new life for them."

Currently we are also working with a number of partners in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and India to build homes and churches for hundreds of Christians who are homeless because of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Please turn to pages 16-17 to find out more about these important projects, and how you can help.

### Direct persecution

In other countries, thousands of Christians are displaced owing to direct targeting of their communities. Up to 3,000 Christians were forced from their homes following allegations of blasphemy against local Christians in April 2011 in Pakistan. In Egypt, anti-Christian violence is increasing and sometimes entire Christian communities have had to flee their homes; in November 2009 chaos erupted as a mob of up to 3,000 Muslims went on the rampage, attacking Christians and setting fire to their homes, shops and cars to settle a personal dispute.

Perhaps the most shocking example of displacement is Iraq, where the Christian community is undergoing a mass migration. Christians have faced mounting hostility since the Gulf War of 1990-1, as they are seen to be linked with the West because of their faith. They have become the target of threats, bombings, kidnappings and murder, forcing hundreds of thousands of Christians to leave their homes and flee to neighbouring Syria, Jordan or Lebanon. Today, the Christian community in Iraq is estimated at less than a third of its size in 1990, meaning that over a million have left their homeland.

In Orissa, India, Christian families could do nothing but run for their lives into the jungle when Hindu extremists descended on their villages at Christmas 2007 with guns, knives and home-made bombs, shouting slogans such as "Only Hindus to stay here – no Christians to stay here!" Eight months later, attacks began again and continued almost unabated for two months. Thousands of homes were burned to the ground and hundreds of churches and church buildings were destroyed. Those who survived the onslaught of violence and wanted to return to their homes were told, "Come back as Hindu or don't come back at all." Over 56,000 Christians were left homeless.

Fifty-six thousand Christians were left homeless when Hindu extremist mobs torched entire villages in Orissa, India in 2007 and 2008. Violence has continued spasmodically ever since

