CUBA

CHURCH LEADERS CALL FOR INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO PERSECUTION

Church leaders in Cuba have called on the US government to put their country on its list of the world's worst violators of religious freedom. The call comes as the latest available figures show a sharp rise in the number of incidents of religious freedom violations in Cuba, from 28 in 2011 to over 40 incidents recorded between 1 January and 1 May, 2012.

Among the incidents of religious freedom violations recorded so far this year were a number of physical attacks on pastors; one of them, Pastor Reutilio Columbie, suffered brain damage in a brutal assault.

State security agents are believed to be behind the beatings; no one has been held to account for any of them. Other incidents include people being prevented from attending church services and churches being threatened with closure for resisting government interference.

- *Pray for all those who have been affected by the anti-Christian violence in Cuba in 2012. Ask the Lord to comfort and heal His church leaders and pray that He will give them the strength and courage to continue their work for His service, despite the attacks.*
- *Give thanks for the growing Church in Cuba and pray for greater respect for Christianity among the Cuban authorities.*

TUNISIA

CONVERT FROM ISLAM TO CHRISTIANITY BEHEADED

Video footage of a convert from Islam to Christianity being murdered by Muslims has been shown on Egyptian TV. The graphic incident, which is reported to have taken place in Tunisia, was aired on a programme called *Egypt Today*. The footage shows a young man being held down by masked men with a knife to his throat. One man chants a number of Muslim prayers in Arabic, mostly condemning Christianity. The man holding the knife to the Christian convert's throat begins to cut, slowly severing the head amid cries of "Allahu Akbar" ("god is great").

The *Egypt Today* presenter was visibly distressed by the scenes. Then, referring to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis, who together hold the majority of seats in the country's parliament, he asked, "How are such people supposed to govern?"

The footage of this brutal beheading is the latest alarming indication of the violent threat to religious freedom in the post-Arab Spring order.

- *Give thanks to God for our Tunisian brother's life and his faith that would not waver, even unto death. Pray that his witness will touch the hearts of his killers and those who have seen the footage of his death and that they will turn to Christ.*

"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD." (Leviticus 19:18)

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TANZANIA

ZANZIBAR CHURCHES TORCHED BY ISLAMIST SEPARATISTS

Hundreds of members of the Association for Islamic Mobilisation and Propagation (UAMSHO), a separatist Islamist movement in Zanzibar, clashed with police during protests on Saturday 26 May.

The protests which started in the capital, Stone Town, spread to other areas over the ensuing days. The group torched at least two churches and a Christian centre. One minister whose church was attacked reported that rioters invaded the building, poured petrol over it and set it ablaze, reinforcing the fire with burning tyres. The Islamists, who were armed with clubs, machetes and iron bars, also torched homes and bars, destroyed transport and communication systems, and blocked roads.

The semi-autonomous island of Zanzibar is 99% Muslim and UAMSHO is strongly opposed to the government, calling for a referendum on Zanzibar's independence from mainland Tanzania.

- *Pray for the Christians whose churches were attacked in the recent violence. Ask the Lord to comfort His people and pray that they will find alternative space to be able to continue to worship Him.*
- *Pray for our brothers and sisters in Zanzibar as Muslim extremist groups apply increasing pressure to Islamise the island. Praise God that despite these efforts, the Church is growing.*

KAZAKHSTAN

PASTOR CLEARED ON APPEAL

Praise the Lord that Pastor Yerzhan Ushanov, leader of New Life Protestant Church in Taraz, Kazakhstan, has been acquitted by the Supreme Court of "causing severe damage to health due to negligence" after he prayed for the healing of a sick man who visited his church (see *Prayer Focus Update* August 2011).

The case against the pastor had been initiated by the National Security Committee (KNB) secret police who had received a complaint from the man's wife. The pastor was found guilty on 5 September 2011 and ordered to pay a fine and court costs totalling 201,560 Tenge (£870; US$1,365).

This case mirrored that of Vissa Kim, pastor of Grace Light of Love Protestant Church, who was fined in April 2010 for harming a woman's health by praying for her. The Supreme Court subsequently overturned his conviction and cancelled the fine.

Despite this good news, other Christians are still being targeted.

- *Give grateful thanks for the acquittal of Pastor Ushanov and Pastor Kim. The positive outcomes in these two cases go against the trend in Kazakhstan, where Christians have come under mounting pressure as a result of restrictive new laws that came into force in October 2011. Praise God that He is doing a work in that country and touching the hearts of the authorities so that they can overturn convictions.*

INDIA

ATTACK ON CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

A church leader and the 12 families in his congregation were attacked by Hindu extremists on 15 June in the village of Mitrapur, Orissa, India.

Evangelist Baidhar (50) was making his way home from a prayer meeting in a believer's home when he was set upon. He was seriously injured and left bleeding on the ground. The church leader was found shortly afterwards by local Christians who took him to hospital. Around 50 Hindus then attacked the entire Christian community in the village. They injured 20 people, and tore the clothing of some of the young women in an attempt to molest them. The assailants then looted the homes of the 12 families. The Christians fled the village and it is thought that they have been hiding in the jungle.

- *Pray for complete healing for Baidhar and for the others who were injured in this attack.*
- *Pray that God will strengthen His people in India and that violence against them will cease, and that the Indian authorities will protect Christians and bring their persecutors to justice.*

IRAN

FARSI-SPEAKING CHURCH CLOSED; FURTHER SHUTDOWNS FEARED

The forcible closure of a Farsi-speaking church in Janat-Abad, west Tehran, on 29 May has sparked fears of a pending wave of church shutdowns across Iran.

The church has around 100 members and conducts all of its activities in Farsi, the Iranian national language spoken by the Muslim majority.

The Iranian authorities have been focusing their efforts on Farsi-speaking and government-sanctioned churches in recent months (see *Prayer Focus Update* March 2012). The closure of the Janat-Abad church marks an escalation in this campaign.

- *Pray that the believers from the church that was closed down at the end of May will find an alternative venue and will continue to meet to praise the Lord Jesus. Pray for strength and courage for all our brother and sisters in Iran.*

INDONESIA

AUTHORITIES ORDER DEMOLITION OF 20 CHURCHES

The authorities have ordered 20 churches in one regency of the semi-autonomous province of Aceh, Indonesia, to tear down their buildings; this follows the closure of 16 smaller Christian places of worship in the same district in May (see *Prayer Focus Update* June 2012).

Razali Abdul Rahman, the acting regent of Aceh Singkil ordered the church closures in a letter signed on 30 April, setting a deadline of 8 June for demolition. The order was issued on the same day that hard-line Islamist groups including the Islam Defenders Front (FPI) staged a protest in front of his office against Christian places of worship in Aceh Singkil.

The congregations of most of the 20 churches threatened with demolition are continuing to hold services inside their sealed off buildings. Home Minister Gamawan Fauzi said that he was not aware of the closure plans and would contact Mr Razali to ask for clarification, saying that citizens had a right to worship as long as they complied with regulations.

- *Praise God that, at the time of writing, the buildings had not yet been demolished and give thanks that the congregations are continuing to worship in spite of the threats. Pray that the Home Minister will uphold religious freedom and take firm action against Mr Razali's demolition order.*

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NIGERIA

BOKO HARAM DECLARES CHRISTIANS "ENEMIES"

Systematic suicide bombings at three churches in Kaduna State, Nigeria, on the morning of Sunday 17 June left around 16 people dead and scores injured.

The incidents bore the hallmarks of Islamist militant group Boko Haram, which was reported recently as saying, "The Nigerian state and Christians are our enemies and we will be launching attacks on the Nigerian state and its security apparatus as well as churches until we achieve our goal of establishing an Islamic state in place of the secular state."

Barely a Sunday goes by in Nigeria without another church attack. On Sunday 10 June, gunmen burst into a church in Biu, in the north-eastern state of Borno, and opened fire on the congregation. At least one woman was killed and three people were injured. Later that same day, a suicide bomber reportedly disguised as a worshipper drove up to an evangelical church in the central city of Jos, Plateau state, and detonated a bomb. The intensity of the explosion caused the church building to collapse. An estimated 62 people were critically injured, and around ten people are feared to have been killed; six people died in violence that broke out following the blast. And on Sunday 3 June, at least 18 people were killed and more than 40 injured in a suicide car bombing that struck two churches in Bauchi state.

Despite the danger, Christians are continuing to attend services. A pastor in Jos, Plateau state, Abraham Ekeneh, said after the church suicide bombing on 10 June, "I always sense the fear in the atmosphere during Sunday services, but we still don't relent. We cannot stop attending Sunday services because if we do, it means we have helped them to achieve their objective."

- *Pray for all those who were bereaved or injured in the church bombings. Pray that they will know the Lord's comfort in their sorrow and His healing hand on any emotional or physical wounds. Pray that Christians will respond in a Christ-like way.*
- *Pray for courage and wisdom for the government of Nigeria. Pray that they will bring to justice those responsible for the violence and bring an end the regular attacks on Nigerian Christians. Pray for a change of heart for those who lead Boko Haram.*

SYRIA

THOUSANDS OF CHRISTIANS FLEE AMID "ULTIMATUM" REPORTS

Most of the 10,000 Christian residents of Qusayr, Syria, have left, after reportedly being given an ultimatum to leave, a threat which was also echoed by the mosques. Two Christian leaders among those fleeing the city said that they heard the following message from the minarets: "Christians must leave Qusayr within six days, ending Friday (8 June)."

Whether or not they were ordered out, the city is an extremely dangerous place for those who remain and it is clear that Christians no longer feel safe in their homes. A church minister, Atallah Ibrahim Bitar, was shot dead while reportedly taking food to people forced into hiding by a week-long bombardment.

Barnabas Fund has been providing food, medicine and other essentials to the neediest Christian families affected by the unrest.

- *Pray that the Lord will meet the needs of those Christians who have fled their homes and pray too for those who have stayed, that they will find protection in Christ.*
- *Pray for an end to the fighting in Syria and for a just and righteous solution to the crisis.*