

release

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**SPECIAL PRISONERS
OF FAITH ANNIVERSARY
EDITION**



**‘The message I bring from
the underground church
is: “Don’t abandon us!”’**

PASTOR RICHARD WURMBRAND

Nigerians protest against the abductions of more than 200 school girls by Boko Haram militants. Photo: Reuters/Akintunde Akinleye.



NIGERIA

NO MORE SORROW!

Nigerian Christians are under pressure as never before – please help them by signing our petition.

Thanks to the many thousands of supporters who have signed our petition to help persecuted Christians in Nigeria. If you haven't already done so, we would urge you to send in your petition form **NOW** so that it can be included in the presentation to the Nigerian High Commission in London.

The petition can still be signed online at www.releaseinternational.org/online-campaign.

The situation in Nigeria continues to be extremely serious. Since the 200-plus schoolgirls were kidnapped by Islamic terrorists Boko Haram from the Christian enclave of Chibok in the northern Borno state in April, another group were reportedly abducted from three villages in the state – they later managed to escape.

These kidnappings, however, are just part of a campaign of terror and violence being waged by Boko Haram, whose goal is to establish an Islamic state.

Bombings in the capital Abuja and Jos in the central Plateau state earlier this year,

which were blamed on the militant group, claimed more than 200 lives.

'The impunity with which Boko Haram appears to operate is deeply concerning,' said Release chief executive Paul Robinson.

'Now that the international media attention has moved elsewhere the plight of Christians in Nigeria is once more being ignored. But as Christians we must not forget our brothers and sisters who are still undergoing these desperate trials in Nigeria.'

Please stand with persecuted Christians in northern and central Nigeria by praying



for an end to the violence. In the last edition of *Release* we included a 31-day guide to help you to pray for Christians in Nigeria. If you would like another copy

please contact us on 01689 823491 or email info@releaseinternational.org.

A SONG THAT CHANGES LIVES

Money raised from sales of our campaign song *No More Sorrow!* will be used to help persecuted Christians in Nigeria by providing medical aid for the injured, emergency supplies, trauma counselling, reroofing homes and paying school fees for orphans.

The song, which can be downloaded from iTunes for 79p, was written by UK songwriter Noel Robinson and features a fantastic line-up of Christian worship leaders and singers, including many from the Nigerian diaspora.

'I'm delighted to say that the song is proving very popular on iTunes,' said Release chief executive Paul Robinson. 'I would urge everyone to buy it because not only are you getting an amazing track with inspiring lyrics and music and superb vocals but you're also helping your persecuted brothers and sisters in northern Nigeria.'

When you download the song from iTunes please remember to leave a comment and let your friends know that you've bought it.

Music Video



Watch the *No More Sorrow!* music video featuring singer-songwriter Noel Robinson and

Nigerian worship leaders recording the track at the Smokehouse studio in London. The video can be watched on the Release website www.releaseinternational.org. Please feel free to play it in your church or prayer group.



Wear this colourful wristband as a reminder to pray for Nigeria as part of our 'No More Sorrow!' campaign. They cost £1 each, three for £2 or 25 for £10, and can be ordered by calling 01689 823491 or from our eStore www.releaseinternational.org/estore.

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER 2014



Resources and prayers to help you and your church take part in this year's International Day of Prayer (IDOP) for persecuted Christians on Sunday, November 16.¹

Every year many churches around the world take part in one of the world's largest prayer movements by joining the International Day of Prayer (IDOP) for persecuted Christians.

Please ask your church leaders now to consider taking part on Sunday, November 16.¹ Look at the resources and prayers shown here, and plan your prayer event.

Praying for prisoners of faith

Release is suggesting that you focus your prayers this year on Christian prisoners of faith and their families, using this special edition of *Release* magazine, and our latest 10-minute DVD *Scattered*, which includes brief testimonies of Christian former prisoners in Iran, and prayer points.

Our special report on Christians imprisoned for their faith (see pages i-xii of this magazine) gives plenty of background information on the often extreme pressures facing Christians in prison, as well as details

of a number of current prisoners (five are shown as part of the map on pages vi-vii). Pages x-xi (Praying for Prisoners of Faith) includes biblical teaching that could form the basis of a sermon or introduction to your prayer time, as well as a written Prayer for Prisoners for everyone to read aloud.

You are welcome to photocopy any of these pages, or to print from the downloadable pdf available from www.releaseinternational.org/idop, where you can also find PowerPoint versions of the



Former prisoners of faith in Iran share their inspiring stories on our latest DVD *Scattered*.

map with prayer points and the Prayer for Prisoners.

Teens and twenties can send their own special postcard to Chinese prisoner of faith Alimjan Yimit as part of Release Potential's latest Persecution Uncovered session (see overleaf).

Our latest DVD *Scattered* includes the inspiring testimonies of a number of former prisoners of faith from Iran, who are now serving God in neighbouring Turkey. The DVD includes prayer points for prisoners in Iran, as well as for the continuing outreach of the scattered believers in Turkey.

The DVD is free to supporters, although a suggested donation of £10 helps towards our costs. It may be requested by calling our Supporter Relations Team on 01689 823491 or purchased from our eStore at www.releaseinternational.org/estore. •

MORE DVDs

These DVDs also include prayer points and are ideal for use as part of an IDOP event:

AMAZING GRACE (Egypt)



This award-winning 12-minute report tells three remarkable stories of deliverance as mobs set out to destroy Christian churches, businesses and homes in Egypt.

CRISIS POINT (Nigeria)



Continuing violence is taking a devastating toll on Christian families in Nigeria.

This 11-minute DVD features moving testimonies from believers who have lost loved ones or been caught up in an attack.

FREE TO FOLLOW (India)



Powerfully depicts the pressures facing many Christians in India today, who are increasingly the target of militant Hindu groups (10 minutes).

IN THE FIRE (Azerbaijan)



Reports on the growing persecution of Christians in the oil-rich nation of Azerbaijan, where churches unable to register can be declared illegal. Includes interviews with pastors who have been imprisoned for evangelising (11 minutes).

These DVDs are available **free of charge** to supporters. A suggested donation of £10 would contribute to our costs (£2 for each additional DVD). They may also be purchased from our eStore www.releaseinternational.org/estore.

¹ You may of course choose another date if you wish.

BEHIND BARS FOR JESUS

SEND A CARD TO CHINESE CHRISTIAN ALIMJAN YIMIT WHO IS SERVING A 15-YEAR SENTENCE FOR FOLLOWING JESUS



HEAR THE STORY (5 MINS)

PRISONER NAME: ALIMJAN YIMIT

LOCATION: CHINA

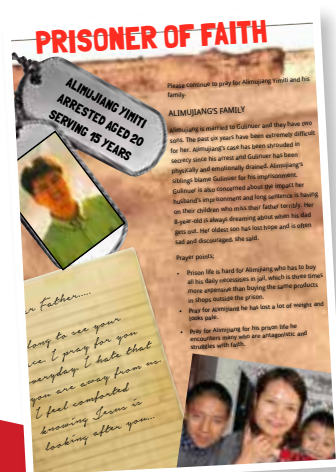
ARRESTED: JANUARY 2008

Alimjan Yimit is a Christian from the ethnic Uyghur group in Xinjiang province in northwest China. In September 2007 Chinese government officials closed his business and accused him of using it as a cover for 'preaching Christianity among people of Uyghur ethnicity'.

He was later arrested in January 2008 and was convicted in 2009 of 'instigating separatism and revealing state secrets' and sentenced to 15 years in prison. Those close to the case maintain that the reason for Alimjan's imprisonment is his zealous commitment to share the gospel and for leading a church in the Uyghur area of northwest China.

Alimjan is a former Muslim – he became a Christian at the age of 20. Prior to his arrest, he had been questioned by police on many occasions about his Christian activities.

In April 2010 his wife Gulnuer was finally permitted to visit him for the first time since his imprisonment. She and her two sons are allowed to visit him for only 15 minutes every three months.



Imagine how one of Alim's sons might write to their father in prison:

'DEAR PAPA

I MISS YOU VERY MUCH. IS THERE ANY NEWS OF YOU COMING HOME? MUM ISN'T DOING TOO WELL. SHE HAS BEEN SAD FOR SUCH A LONG TIME – SHE MISSES YOU SO MUCH. I'M TRYING TO FIND WAYS TO CHEER HER UP BUT IT'S HARD WITHOUT YOU BEING AROUND. I AM PRAYING FOR YOU, I LOVE YOU AND I PRAY THAT YOU COME HOME SOON...'

CREATIVE AND PRAYER RESPONSE (25 MINS)

SEND A CARD OF ENCOURAGEMENT TO ALIM

Prison address: Section 11, Xinjiang No. 3 Prison No. 1339, Dongzhan Road, Urumqi City, Xinjiang, Uyghur Autonomous Region 830013, People's Republic of China.

When writing please do not mention Release International, advance your political opinions or include anything which could be insulting to the authorities (also see box right).

Download the Prisoner of Faith prayer card from releasepotential.org/prisoneroffaith. Print one for each person in your youth group.

Split your youth into smaller groups, read the Prisoner of Faith card and pray for the following points:

- Prison life is hard for Alimjan who has to buy all his daily necessities in jail, which is three times more expensive than buying the same products in shops outside prison.
- He has lost a lot of weight and looks pale.
- Inside prison Alim encounters many challenges, including the antagonism of other inmates.

THEME: UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES CHRISTIAN FAMILIES FACE WHEN A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY IS IMPRISONED FOR THEIR FAITH.

AIM: TO UNDERSTAND PERSECUTION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FAMILY MEMBERS.

EQUIPMENT NEEDED: PRISONER OF FAITH POSTCARD PDF, PENS, FELT-TIP PENS, COLOURED CARD, GLUE AND SCISSORS.

AGE: 14+

TIME: 30 MINUTES

DO'S AND DON'TS

DO:

- ✓ Write legibly so that your card can be translated if necessary.
- ✓ Pray for the person who will receive your encouragement as you write.
- ✓ Tell them that they are not forgotten and that they are loved.
- ✓ Keep it short.
- ✓ Quote a Bible verse, and give the reference.
- ✓ Sign it with just your first name and the country you are from.
- ✓ If you are under 16, check your letter or card with a Christian parent or church/youth leader.

DON'T

- ✗ Mention Release International or your source of information.
- ✗ Write about politics or criticise governments or authorities.
- ✗ Give your full name or any contact details.
- ✗ Send any money with your card.



'REMEMBER THOSE IN PRISON'

Hebrews 13:3



During the past ten years you have helped hundreds of Christian prisoners and their families through prayer, letter-writing and campaigning, and by providing practical care.

Release Prisoners is foundational to our vision and purpose – but we can't help prisoners of faith without you. That's why we are so grateful for the prayers and gifts of

supporters in the UK and Ireland that have sustained this ministry for the past decade.

We trust that this special 12-page report will bring both inspiration and challenge as together we continue to love and serve persecuted Christians in the name of Jesus.

Paul Robinson CEO, Release International





Aster

Aster

A PRECIOUS JEWEL

Aster is a gentle, quiet and gracious Christian woman from the tiny East African nation of Eritrea. If you were to pass her in the street you probably would not notice anything unusual about her. Yet her remarkable story shows that she is one of God's treasures, writes Release's Prisoners of Faith manager.

ERITREA

There was great joy the day that Aster's mother gave birth to her and her identical twin sister.

As the girls grew up they shared many of life's experiences, including coming to faith in Christ. The girls were extremely close and did everything together.

In July 2008 both, now women, were guests at a wedding celebration when the security police arrested the whole wedding party, including all the guests. They were taken by force, loaded on to trucks and driven to a detention centre.

For four days they were interrogated and given nothing to eat. Aster and her twin steadfastly refused to sign a paper

renouncing their faith, even though this would have brought immediate freedom.

As a result, Aster, her sister and many others from the wedding were confined in prison. From then on, in jails and prison camps throughout the country, Aster and her sister were frequently beaten and brutally tortured.

In a military camp at Sawa in the west of the country they were both imprisoned in a metal shipping container. These containers become exceedingly hot during the day, but freezing cold at night. In Wi'a, near the Red Sea, the heat from the sun is intense and relentless – as were the beatings from their guards.

On many occasions the two women were singled out for unimaginable suffering. They were made to lie for hours on the burning hot desert stones and then forced into underground cells where they were left to nurse open, infected wounds.

They had little or no food, and no medical treatment. But still they resisted the offer of their captors to deny their faith and secure their release.

Then one evening, Aster, her sister and another woman prisoner were taken from their underground cell into the bush. They knew that once again they were going to be beaten.

'Those beatings were not meant to kill you,' said Aster. 'If you die then you no longer feel pain and they wanted to inflict as much pain as they could.'

She never thought for a moment that her sister might die, even though she could hear her anguished cries. But that night Aster's identical twin went to be with Christ.

For weeks Aster believed that her sister was in a hospital or a clinic somewhere, recovering. The guards never told Aster that her sister had died as a result of her injuries.

Eventually Aster was released from detention on account of her worsening health, and managed to leave the country. Partners of Release have provided her with pastoral care and practical support.

'If you die then you no longer feel pain and they wanted to inflict as much pain as they could.'



Entrance to an underground prison in Eritrea.

PRISON STATE

Eritrea today is a nation held hostage by its own Government. It is one of the most repressive, secretive and inaccessible countries in the world where thousands of Eritreans languish in prison cells and 'secret' detention camps. It is estimated that more than 1,000 Christians are currently detained without trial.

The exact number of prisons in Eritrea is unknown – but this extensive network houses men, women and even children. Prisoners remain largely hidden from the outside world, stripped of their dignity and

freedom, while their lives ebb away in squalid and overcrowded conditions.

Christian prisoners are routinely subjected to torture in an attempt to force them to recant their faith. Several Christian prisoners have died in detention as a result of torture, the appalling conditions, or being refused necessary medical treatment.

Despite such treatment, many Eritrean prisoners of faith have demonstrated a deep trust in the Lord, even witnessing to other prisoners during their time of incarceration. In her book *Song of the Nightingale*, gospel singer Helen Berhane recalls the time when she was kept in solitary confinement in a metal shipping container:

'Although I was lonely, I actually came to enjoy my time in solitary confinement. It was fruitful because I managed to write encouragement and Bible teaching to other prisoners. I wrote under a blanket so that if the guards looked in they would not see me, and often I would write up to sixteen pages of letters to fellow prisoners.' •

Release Prisoners has provided assistance to the families of prisoners inside Eritrea, and has helped those who have escaped to neighbouring Ethiopia to start small businesses. Release has also encouraged supporters to write letters in support of individual prisoners and to petition the authorities to release those being held without trial.



The autobiography of Eritrean gospel singer Helen Berhane, *Song of the Nightingale*, is a remarkable account of triumphant faith. It

can be purchased from Release for £8 including postage and packing from our eStore at www.releaseinternational.org/estore or by calling 01689 823491. Profits support Release's work in Eritrea.

IRAN

CRACKDOWN ON HOUSE CHURCHES

Iran is another country where actively living out your Christian faith can lead to a harsh prison sentence.

In the past three years there has been a significant increase in the level of persecution directed at house churches.

Despite the accession to power of the more moderate Hassan Rouhani and hopes of an improvement in human rights, Ayatollah Khomeini, former President Ahmadinejad and other senior figures have stated that these unregistered churches represent a significant threat to the state.

These statements have led to crackdowns on Christians, with hundreds arrested.

Some have described prison in Iran as 'hell on earth'. Evin prison, in the capital Tehran, is 'home' to a number of Christian pastors and church leaders.

Many prisoners are placed in solitary confinement where typically the cell will have just enough room to lie down in. There will be a toilet and a basin, but no bed. A single light burns 24 hours a day.

Generally, when a prisoner first enters Evin they are blindfolded and taken underground for interrogation. Then, in a

hallway, they will be kept waiting for hours, possibly even days – the extended wait being deliberately designed to increase anxiety.

During interrogation prisoners are handcuffed, and at some point may be forced to lie face down on a bed, so that the soles of their feet can be whipped with a piece of electrical cable. Such beatings have lasted for hours.

No lawyer will be present, and no one will intervene to stop the torture. The degree of punishment is entirely at the discretion of the prison staff. After a while the psychological pressure is increased.

Prisoners may be told that their trial has already taken place and that they have been found guilty. Some will be told that they have been given the death sentence. Family and friends are not permitted to visit. The prisoner will be told that the world outside has abandoned them.

Repeated interrogation is often accompanied by various forms of torture, designed not simply to extract information, but to break the human spirit. The aim is to conquer and humiliate detainees by removing their dignity and self-worth.

Prisoners are made to feel afraid, isolated, and vulnerable and to believe that they can be disposed of by the state with impunity. Almost certainly their immediate family will be threatened with arrest, torture or death. •

IMPRISONED FOR JESUS FARSHID FATHI



Farshid Fathi

Iranian church leader Farshid Fathi was arrested in December 2010 and taken to the Ministry of Intelligence building in Tehran before being

transferred to Evin prison. In a letter written to his father in November 2012, Pastor Fathi wrote:

'Often I have been insulted, humiliated and accused, but I have never doubted my identity in Christ... I spent 361 days in a locked cell, and I did not see sunlight for days.

'Neither walls, nor barbed wire, nor prison, nor suffering, nor loneliness, nor enemies, nor pain, nor even death separates us from the Lord and each other.'

Release has helped to train and mentor Iranian men and women for ministry in the church, and to offer emergency support for individuals and families experiencing persecution. In addition many supporters have written letters to encourage and support individual prisoners of faith, and pray regularly for prisoners and their families.



North Korean border guard.
Photo: Reuters/Lee Jae-Won.

NORTH KOREA

INSIDE THE SECRET GULAG

An estimated 200,000 North Koreans are detained in prison camps, including many thousands of Christians.

Every day in North Korea's prison camps, an estimated 30,000 Christians rise in the predawn hours, eat a few mouthfuls of corn porridge and cabbage, and trudge to their assigned workplace.

They then spend about 15 hours labouring in coal mines, cleaning and maintaining the camp, or doing farm or construction work. In the evening, they return to eat the same meagre meal before falling asleep on concrete floors.

Other Christians may not be so fortunate. Instead of labouring for hours at backbreaking work under the eye of cruel guards, they are locked in torture chambers and underground prisons.

Survivors of North Korean prison camps have described being locked in cages like animals, forced to stand for hours in excruciating positions and being beaten until they vomited blood.

The authorities are very careful to

conceal details about these camps from the outside world, but Release partners estimate that 200,000 North Koreans are detained in them.

North Koreans found guilty of lesser infractions are sent to the *kyohwaso*, or ordinary labour camps, from which they might one day be released. But those found guilty of serious 'crimes', such as practising Christianity, are sent to the *kwanliso*, controlled areas for political prisoners. The regime may arrest entire families, punishing three generations of a family for the crime of just one member.

Most prisoners sent to the *kwanliso* are incarcerated for life. Inmates are denied contact with the outside world, and not even their closest family members receive information of their whereabouts. Very few people have ever been released from a *kwanliso*.

Conditions in these camps are so bad that nearly 40 per cent of inmates die of starvation, while others commonly lose up to half their body weight. Prisoners tell of eating grass and rats to survive and of fighting over a single kernel of corn. Survivors of these camps are often permanently disfigured from torture and from being chained to walls for days or weeks at a time.

Most of those who have disappeared into the *kwanliso* have been found guilty of one of three crimes: they tried to flee North Korea, they had unauthorised contact with citizens of South Korea, or they were discovered to be Christians.

While Christianity is not explicitly illegal and a few show churches are allowed in Pyongyang, in practice, the authorities consider adherence to the Christian faith a political crime.

State security makes concerted efforts to identify Christians. Agents are trained to suppress religious activities and systematically to interrogate repatriated citizens about their contact with churches and missionaries while outside North Korea. Those found to have engaged in such conduct face harsher punishment. •

Release helps to provide refuge and spiritual support to enable North Korean defectors to travel along the 'underground railroad' to South Korea. We also support discipleship and vocational training for new North Korean Christians in South Korea.



Phoebe's story

At a conference earlier this year organised by Release Women, North Korean Christian Joseph shared for the first time the testimony of his mother Phoebe (names have been changed).

Joseph explained that at one point his mother had been in desperate need for medicines, and had secretly crossed the border into China to find them. She had been told to look for a building with a cross on it, because inside would be people who could help her. 'Here she gave her life to Jesus,' he said.

After she returned to North Korea, Joseph could tell that his mother had changed as a result of her new-found faith. 'She gave food and medicine to people in our village. Even after we left, she kept returning to the village to help the poorest people there.

'Neighbours who had been helped by my mother introduced others who were going through difficult times. When people came to meet her, they talked about their problems. My mother told them how she had had similar problems, like losing her daughter and needing medicine for her husband's illness. She shared how Jesus had changed her life.

'Despite the risk, my mother continued traveling back and forth to China to get food and medicine, going five times a year for more than ten years. Although she was interrogated and even arrested numerous times by North Korean state security agents, by God's grace she was released each time.

'Whenever she went to prison, the whole family would pray without sleeping all day and night. And God answered our prayers.

The more we prayed, the more we became convinced that God would respond, and our own faith continued to grow.

'Then, in 2011, the Pyongyang office of National Security searched my family's house and found a Bible. My mother was arrested, and this time she was not released because of this clear evidence of her personal faith.

'All the people she had evangelised were called as witnesses against her. Their belief in God was taken as proof that she was a spy.

'At the conclusion of the investigation, my mother was sentenced to death. She was publicly executed by firing squad.

'There are so many people who die in North Korea due to their belief in God. My Mum was not an exception. [However,] every time I hear someone near me say the word 'Mother', it sticks in my mind and I have a hard time sleeping for days afterward.

'On one of those sleepless nights I made a decision to dedicate my life to the God in whom my mother believed. I decided that no matter how many people persecute Christians, I will love God and North Korea, my own country.' •

release
women



Photos: Reuters

TRUE DISCIPLESHIP

For Christian prisoners of faith, 'taking up their cross and following Christ' is no easy road. Their testimony of enduring faith is both a challenge and an encouragement to their brothers and sisters in Christ here in the UK and Ireland and around the world.

North Korean, Eritrean, Iranian and other Christians who seek to share and live out their faith in these countries often pay a high personal price – yet it is a price they accept as 'normal' Christian discipleship.

Their prison experience is not viewed with surprise or outrage; on the contrary, they often regard the prison cell as their mission field, imprisonment as training and the whole experience as part of God's purpose and plan.

The reality is that today in detention centres and prison camps across the world, God is doing exactly what He promised to do: building His church.

Just as He did with the early church, God is there in those cells watching over His children, pouring out His love into their hearts and reaching out in love to others, prisoners and persecutors alike. Still He calls us to: 'remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison' (Hebrews 13:3).

To make a gift to support the ministry of Release Prisoners, please use the back-page coupon.

'REMEMBER THOSE IN PRISON'

HEBREWS 13:3

Please pull out this poster and use it in your home or church as a reminder to pray for Christian prisoners of faith around the world.



Countries where Christians have been imprisoned because of their faith since 2010.

MEXICO



CUBA

IRAN

Christian prisoners of faith: more than 50



Pray for Maryam Nagash Zargaran

Maryam, also known as Nasim, was arrested in August 2013 and is serving a four-year sentence because of her house church activities. She is believed to be in poor physical and emotional health.



MOROCCO

ERITREA

Christian prisoners of faith:
more than 1,000 (estimate)



Pray for Dr Tekleab

Respected physician and church leader Dr Tekleab Menghisteb was detained in November 2005. He has been reported to be in poor health.



SERVING PRISONERS
OF FAITH FOR
10 YEARS

CHINA

Christian prisoners of faith: more than 20



Pray for Alimjan Yimit

Alim is serving 15 years in a Chinese prison for his faith. His wife Gulnuer and two sons, now aged 15 and 8, need prayer as they wait for his release.

NORTH KOREA

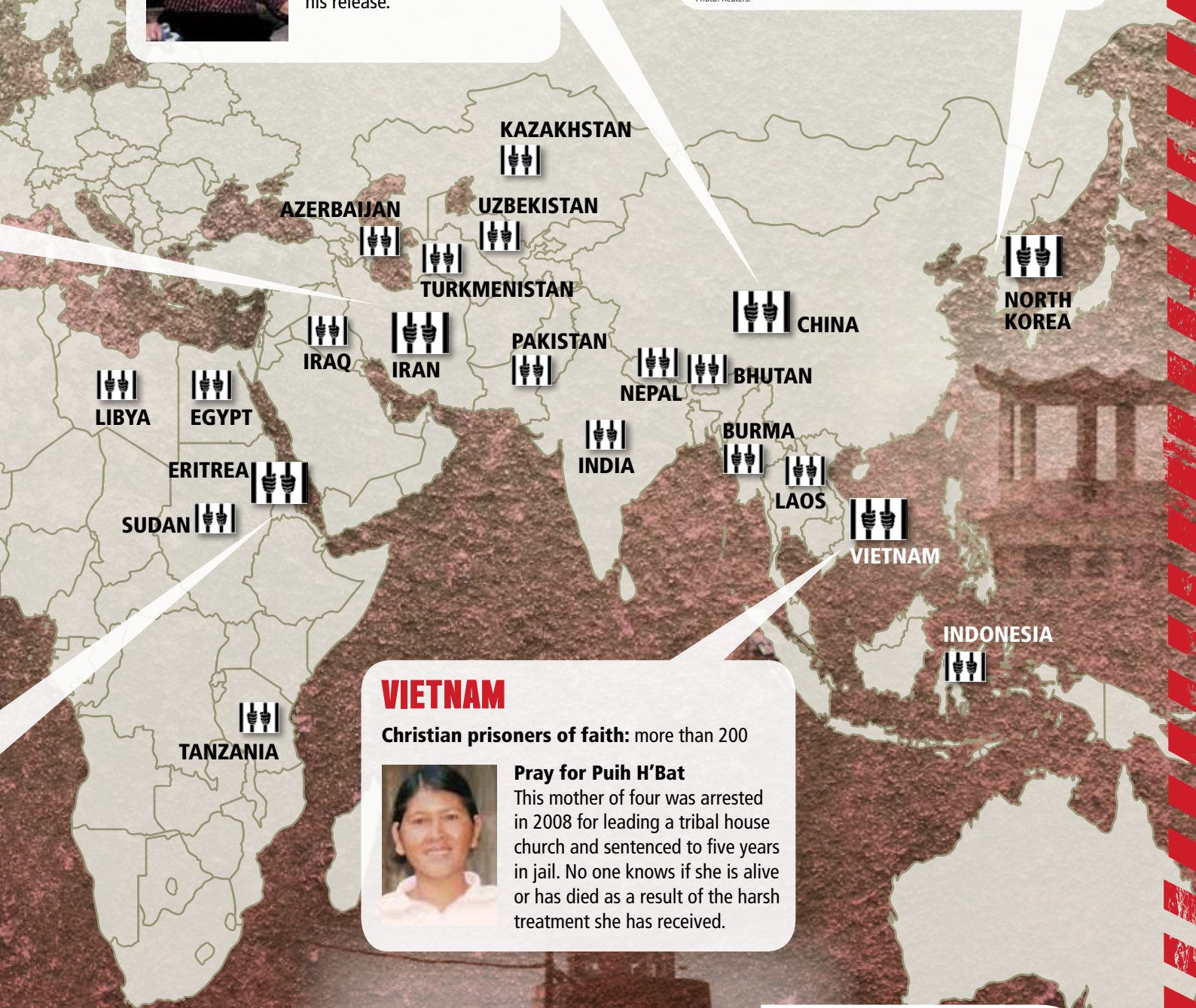
Christian prisoners of faith:
more than 30,000 (estimate)



Photo: Reuters.

Pray for Kim Jung-wook

On May 30, 2014, a court in Pyongyang sentenced South Korean missionary Kim Jung-wook to a life of hard labour because of his evangelistic activities inside North Korea.



VIETNAM

Christian prisoners of faith: more than 200



Pray for Puih H'Bat

This mother of four was arrested in 2008 for leading a tribal house church and sentenced to five years in jail. No one knows if she is alive or has died as a result of the harsh treatment she has received.

www.releaseinternational.org

release
international
voice of persecuted christians

'Don't abandon them'

Our ministry to Christian prisoners of faith goes back to the very origins of Release – and to the courageous life of Pastor Richard Wurmbrand who inspired a generation to 'remember those in prison' (Hebrews 13:3).

Being imprisoned for your faith in Christ is not the most common form of persecution in our world today – but it is one of the most distinctive.

To be locked away, to be denied your freedom, and very often to suffer prolonged inhumane treatment brings obvious pressure, both on the faith of the individual concerned and on their family.

Release International's Prisoners of Faith ministry has specialised in supporting imprisoned Christians and their families over the past ten years, but the origins of this work go back to the very beginning of Release International.

The inspiration for Release's ministry was Pastor Richard Wurmbrand, who endured a total of 14 years of imprisonment at the hands of the Communist regime in his native Romania.

First arrested in 1948, he initially served eight-and-a-half years in prison. During that time he was kept in solitary confinement for extended periods, seeing no one but his military torturers. Cruelly his family were told he had died in prison.

He was eventually released and resumed his gospel ministry with the underground church of Romania, before being re-arrested in 1959 and sentenced to 25 years in prison. The conditions he lived under – and faithfully endured – are described in his famous book *Tortured for Christ* (see box opposite).

Richard was released from prison as part of a general amnesty in 1964. By then

he had become a high-profile individual and Christians in Norway negotiated with the Communist regime of Romania for his release. As a result, he was ransomed out of the country for \$10,000.

His story quickly spread around the Christian world, and he and his wife Sabina inspired a number of Christian missions to support those who were being persecuted for their faith in Christ, which is why Release continues to honour the Wurmbrand name.

Tortured for Christ continues to be a challenging and inspirational read, testifying as it does to the sustaining grace of God in the most awful and testing of circumstances.

When we turn to the New Testament we encounter believers suffering imprisonment for their faith.

The first recorded case of persecution after the ascension of Christ comes in Acts 4, when Peter and John are imprisoned (albeit briefly). Upon their release they are threatened and warned not to preach any more about the risen Lord Jesus. Their experience prompts the rest of the believers to pray for boldness to continue preaching!

In Acts 16 Paul and Silas are imprisoned in Philippi after local people make accusations against them to the authorities. Not only do we read of them cheerfully praying and singing hymns while chained to a wall, but God powerfully intervenes and uses their suffering to bring about the conversion of the Philippian jailer.



Richard Wurmbrand, when he was first arrested in 1948.
Bottom: After his release in 1964.

Advancing the gospel

Paul was later imprisoned in Rome, from where he wrote several of his New Testament epistles. In one of them, his letter to the Philippians, he is able to testify: 'I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ' (Philippians 1:12-13, ESV).

The ability to see such harrowing circumstances as a God-given opportunity for the gospel is itself a gift of God's grace. Many have testified to this down the years, including Richard Wurmbrand.

He wrote in *Tortured for Christ*: 'It was strictly forbidden to preach to other prisoners, as it is in captive nations today. It was understood that whoever was caught doing this received a severe beating. A number of us decided to pay the price for the privilege of preaching, so we accepted their terms. It was a deal: we preached and they beat us.'



Richard and his wife Sabina, who was also imprisoned in communist Romania.



Pastor Richard Wurmbrand tells the powerful story of his imprisonment by the Romanian authorities and eventual release in *Tortured for Christ*. This can

be purchased from our eStore at www.releaseinternational.org/estore for £8 including postage and packing, or by calling our Supporter Relations Team on 01689 823491. Profits from the sale of the book will be used to help persecuted Christians.

Piecing together a chronology from what he says in his later letters, it seems Paul may have been released from his initial confinement in Rome to resume his ministry. However, if so, he was later re-arrested and imprisoned again, before being tried and executed. In what is probably the last New Testament letter he wrote (2 Timothy) we find him in prison again, expecting the end to come soon.

In chapter one of this letter he urges young Pastor Timothy not to be 'ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner' (2 Timothy 1:8). From a purely human point of view it can be considered a deeply shameful thing to be locked away in prison – even if it is for no other reason than one's faith in Christ and one's determination to preach Him to others.

Paul then goes on to give a wonderful example of Christian care and compassion for a believer in prison. He writes: 'May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains, but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me earnestly and found me' (2 Timothy 1:16-17).

Visiting someone like Paul in prison could have been risky, as in doing so Onesiphorus would have been identifying himself with the same 'subversive sect'. And yet we are told he searched for Paul 'earnestly'. Not only that, Paul testifies to the fact that Onesiphorus 'often refreshed' him with his visits!

A Christian imprisoned for sharing the gospel can easily feel alone in a hostile world. Their family, too, may feel marginalised and isolated. So the support of Christians in the UK and Ireland – prayerfully, pastorally and practically – can be a real blessing.

Beloved

After his release from prison Richard Wurmbrand discovered that Christians in the 'free West' knew of his plight and had been praying for him. To him these believers 'were like angels sent from God!' Later they brought him Bibles and other Christian materials for use in the underground church. 'It was not only that they gave us the word of God, but we saw that we were beloved,' he wrote.

In the final chapter of *Tortured for Christ* Richard Wurmbrand urges Christians living in freedom to express Christian love and concern toward their persecuted and imprisoned fellow Christians, not just in prayer, but also financially and practically.

He also reminds us of the need to care for the families of those in prison.

'When a member of the underground church is arrested, a terrible tragedy strikes their family. It is usually illegal for anyone to help them. This is very well planned by the Governments to increase the suffering of the family left behind. When a Christian goes to prison – and often to torture or death – the suffering only begins. The family suffers endlessly. I can state for a fact that if rank-and-file Christians in the free world had not sent me and my family help, we would never have survived to write these words!'

Richard concluded *Tortured for Christ* with a passionate plea to Western churches not to forget persecuted Christians, especially prisoners: 'Don't abandon them!'

His stark words remain as true today as they were in his lifetime. •

Kenneth Harrod



Praying for Prisoners of Faith

Intercession is a crucial part of our ministry to prisoners and their families, writes Release's Prisoners of Faith manager. Prayer is the most necessary action, the greatest gift, one of the hardest spiritual labours, as well as the simple cry of a loving heart.

The time that we give in prayer will have a direct impact on the lives of prisoners of faith and their families. Writing from prison to the Christians in Philippi, the Apostle Paul expresses his confidence in the effectiveness of their prayers on his behalf. 'I know,' he says, 'that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance' (Philippians 1:19).

Paul is grateful for their support, but he also takes joy in their intercession for him in his persecutions. Present-day prisoners of faith rejoice in our prayers for them and often desire these above all else.

They – and we – can be confident that those prayers are effective in furthering God's purpose for them, whether He delivers them from their distress or enables them to endure it.

1 Praying in Jesus' name

In John's Gospel 14:13-14, 15:16 and 16:23-26 we see that Jesus repeatedly tells His disciples to pray to the Father in His (Jesus') name. The concept of one's name in scripture involves much more than a tag to identify that person from others.

In scripture the name represents the very essence of the person. Their personality, character, reputation and authority are all important elements to a person's name. We cherish a good name because it refers to virtue and integrity. A good name is something of value and should be nurtured and respected.

This helps us to understand why God's name is so often exalted in the Bible. God's name is a declaration of the greatness of His person (Psalm 8:1, Psalm 103:1, Psalm 148:13).

Doing something in someone else's name has two implications. First, you come by the authority of the other person and secondly, when you come in someone's name, you come in their stead. The person to whom you come is expected to react to you, not on the basis of who you are, but as if the person who sent you was there themselves. They are to treat you as they would treat the one who authorised you to come.

The significance of this for us as we pray for prisoners of faith is this: when we come to the Father, we come because Jesus sent us. We are sent to Him by His own Son, on His authority.

When we pray in Jesus' name, the Father is pleased to treat us as He would His own Son, because we come in His stead. The Father looks at His redeemed children as if He were looking on His Son Jesus Christ. What a blessing that Christ has told us to approach the Father in His name! How important and powerful it is to pray for prisoners of faith in Jesus' precious name!

2 Praying scripture

In first letter to the church at Thessalonica Paul makes this short but impassioned request: 'brothers and sisters, pray for us' (1 Thessalonians 5:25).

In other writings of Paul we see that he often asked his brothers and sisters in Christ to join his ministry by praying for him (eg, Romans 15:30).

Here are some of the things Paul prayed for – or desired to see in his own life or the lives of other Christians:



Cai Hong, wife of imprisoned Chinese pastor Wenxi Li, testifies to the power of prayer. 'We have never wanted for anything because God's grace has been sufficient. Prayer is the most precious thing.'

2 Thessalonians 3:1: That the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured.

Ephesians 6:19ff: That whenever I speak words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel for which I am an ambassador in chains.

Colossians 4:3: That God may open a door for our message.

2 Corinthians 12:9ff: That he would see God's grace as sufficient and God's power perfected in his weakness.

Ephesians 3:16: That they may be strengthened with power through His Spirit in their inner being.

At other times Paul expressed a desire to see certain characteristics in others, which may reflect prayers he had prayed:

Philippians 1:29: That they would understand they were made for such persecution.

2 Corinthians 1:8ff: That they would learn more completely to trust in God.

3 **Praying as if you were there in prison with them**

If when you pray you picture yourself for a moment in that prison cell with the person you are praying for, as if you are suffering together with them, it will fuel prayers for them and their families.

Many of those Release has met over the years who have been imprisoned for their

faith see their experience as an opportunity to know God more fully and to serve Him more faithfully.

Like the Apostle Paul they view their suffering as somehow entering into the suffering of Christ and, as such, a privilege. This is a hard thing for those of us who have never experienced persecution to understand fully.

Prisoners of faith may demonstrate a remarkable lack of concern for themselves and their situation, but often their concern is very much for their wives, husbands, children and wider family circle.

Iranian pastor Benham Irani wrote from prison in Iran:

'I wonder what emotional and mental damage may be done to the families of imprisoned Christians. How can the Government make reparation for these damages? What is the price of a wife and children deprived of their father's presence?'

The families of prisoners (particularly if they are not permitted to visit), often go through anguish, uncertainty and concern not knowing whether their loved one is being beaten, tortured or even if they are still alive.

Spouses of prisoners are left bereft of the emotional support and intimacy they shared with their partner and left with the responsibility of bringing up their children alone; teaching their children to trust God when their own husband or wife is in prison for trusting God.

It's vital that we remember the families of prisoners of faith in our prayers. •

A PRAYER FOR PRISONERS

Release magazine, *Prayer Shield* and our Prisoners of Faith email alert contain many reports about individual prisoners of faith. Please use this prayer (below) as a starting point for interceding for an individual prisoner. As suggested in point 3, left, you may like to spend a few moments imagining that you are in the cell with the prisoner.

Father of compassion and God of all comfort, awesome in power.

Shine your light today inside the darkest prisons and underground cells, comfort Your precious children by Your Holy Spirit, breathe Your life and healing into tired or damaged limbs, and revive the faith of those who are weak.

Feed the hungry with supernatural provision, bring new life and joy eternal even to the persecutors, and give grace and mercy to the families of prisoners and courage to trust in you day by day. In the name above all names we pray – the wonderful name of Jesus – Amen.

Do something amazing

Today many hundreds of Christian prisoners of faith and their families need our continuing prayers and support. Here are some practical ways you can help:

WRITE A LETTER

Our free booklets *Reach Out!* and *Speak Out!* give you essential guidance on how to write letters of encouragement to individual Christian prisoners, and letters to the authorities on their behalf. We know that letters such as these can have a significant impact. Download the booklets from www.releaseinternational.org/prisoners or request printed copies below or by calling 01689 823491.

SUBSCRIBE to our free Prisoners of Faith email alert using the coupon below. You will receive a prisoner profile every month, including prayer points and information for letter-writing.

GIVE BY STANDING ORDER

Your regular gift will help us to provide pastoral care and practical help to even more Christian prisoners and their families:

£12 per month could help provide food and medicines for one prisoner in Egypt

£18 per month could enable a front-line Christian worker to visit the families of prisoners in Eritrea

£25 per month could provide basic resources for the family of a Christian prisoner of faith in Vietnam

Your help will make a real difference



I want to help Christian prisoners of faith and their families

- ☐ Please send me your free booklets *Reach Out!* and *Speak Out!*
- ☐ Please send me your Prisoner of Faith email alert (please give email address below)
- ☐ I want to give regularly to support Prisoners of Faith and their families ☐ £12 a month ☐ £18 a month ☐ £25 a month ☐ other _____
- ☐ I am a UK tax payer and would like you to recover tax on my giving ☐ Please send me a standing order form so that I can give regularly

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Read news about persecuted Christians on our website

www.releaseinternational.org/news

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and Facebook www.facebook.com/releaseinternational



One of the last remaining Christian families to leave Mosul for the town of Qaraqush. Photo: Reuters.

IN BRIEF

CHINA: A government campaign against public symbols of the Christian faith has led to the demolition of crosses at two churches in the coastal province of Zhejiang. Public security officials removed three crosses from Longgang Township Gratitude Church, Wenzhou, and from Wenling Church, Taizhou. Demolition notices have been issued to more than 160 churches in the area.

EGYPT: A noted convert released on bail in July for the appeal of his disputed conviction for 'inciting sectarian violence' was quickly imprisoned again on charges of 'defaming Islam'. Bishoy Armia Boulous, previously known as Mohammed Hegazy, has been detained by the Ministry of the Interior to face blasphemy charges filed five years ago.

INDIA: The Nazarene Church at Sehkari Nagar, Bulandshahr, Uttar Pradesh, was attacked on July 16 by activists of the Hindu extremist group, *Bajrang Dal*. The gang ransacked the church, physically assaulted the pastor and vandalised church property, threatening 'dire consequences' if the church was not permanently closed.

KENYA: More than 30 Christians have died in a spate of brutal attacks on predominantly Christian areas in eastern Kenya. Suspected Islamist extremists armed with guns and knives killed at least 13 people in Hindi village in Lamu County, and a further 20 people at Gamba village in neighbouring Tana River County. Eyewitnesses said attackers had told non-Muslims to leave the area or convert to Islam.

NIGERIA: A bomb attack in the northern city of Kano on July 27 killed four Christians and a soldier. The bomb was hurled over a fence at St Charles Church as believers were leaving a worship service. Islamic extremists from the Boko Haram terrorist group were suspected.

SUDAN: Christian Meriam Yahia Ibrahim and her family arrived safely in Italy at the end of July en route for the US. The 27-year-old, who was spared a death sentence for apostasy, was able to leave only after intense diplomatic efforts. She was accompanied by her husband, Daniel, their two-month-old baby Maya, who was born in custody, and son Martin, who is 18 months old.

Sources: China Aid, Morning Star News, The New York Times, Release International.

IRAQ

Christians driven from Mosul

The ancient Christian community of the northern Iraqi city of Mosul have been driven from their homes – ending a presence stretching back nearly two millennia – after radical Islamists set them a deadline to submit to Islamic rule or be executed.

The ultimatum by the militant Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIS) drove out the few hundred Christians who had stayed on when the group's hardline Sunni Muslim fighters overran Mosul in June.

Neighbouring Kurdistan has, however, declared a safe-haven for Christian refugees.

'For the first time in the history of Iraq, Mosul is now empty of Christians,' Patriarch Louis Sako told the AFP news agency. According to reports, IS militants confiscated their homes and stripped them of their remaining belongings as they tried to leave.

Many Muslims have also fled the city and surrounding areas as IS imposed their brutal version of *Sharia* (Islamic law).

• **Pray that God will comfort and provide for the thousands of families who have been displaced.**

Regional Women's Conference

Love Your Neighbour

Join us for a special day to reflect on how we can love and serve our persecuted sisters more deeply.

Saturday November 29 10am-4pm

Three Rivers Church, 88 Denmark Street, Bedford MK40 3TJ

Cost: £5 (payable on the door)

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release
women



release
international
voice of persecuted christians

Our ministry involves:

Showing God's compassion

providing for the needs of the families of Christians who are being persecuted or have been imprisoned or killed

Serving God's church

enabling believers to survive persecution and its effects

Sharing God's love

helping persecuted Christians bring to Christ those who are opposed to the gospel

Spreading God's Word

supplying Bibles and literature to meet the need for growth and evangelism

Speaking as God's advocates

being the voice of the oppressed and persecuted

RELEASE SPEAKERS

Why not invite one of Release's team of development managers to speak in your church or small group?

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Tel 01234 271855

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Release Potential (teens/20s)
Tel 01689 823491

Chief Executive:

Paul Robinson

Council of Reference:

Rt Rev Michael Nazir-Ali

Rt Rev Wallace Benn

Lyndon Bowring

David Coffey

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Release International,

PO Box 54, Orpington BR5 9RT

Telephone 01689 823491

email info@releaseinternational.org

website www.releaseinternational.org

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Volunteer
Noreen visited
China as part
of a Release
ministry team.

'No work is too small, because God can multiply it'

Noreen from Ballyclare, Northern Ireland, was given a burden by God to support persecuted Christians. Is God challenging you in the same way?

After hearing Sarah, a beautiful Chinese lady, speak at a Release Women conference about how she was beaten and tortured, and then reading Richard Wurmbrand's book, *Tortured for Christ*, God gave me a burden for persecuted Christians.

I became a Release volunteer and in February had one of the greatest privileges of my life: I went to China as part of a Release ministry team. We visited both 'underground' (unregistered) Chinese churches and official state-sanctioned Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) congregations. We ministered in prayer, teaching and preaching, and saw God miraculously heal, mend and restore lives.

The first week was spent ministering in the underground church where we witnessed the love and hunger of Christians for the Lord – despite them daily having to look over their shoulder and even hide from family members.

The second week we visited the families of prisoners. We saw the sadness in their eyes, we felt their pain and we cried with them. The majority of these people belong to the TSPM churches. At least three of the churches we

visited had pastors who are detained in 'black' or illegal prisons.

These dear families love the Lord and are determined to preach the gospel for God's Kingdom to be extended. Being a Christian in China certainly comes with a high cost. I saw the true meaning of "taking up the cross" to follow Jesus.

The Christians we met were greatly encouraged to know that God's family cares for them deeply. God calls us to strengthen each other and in doing so we honour Him.

As for me, I am an ordinary housewife with a heavenly Father! He chooses to use the weak and the foolish things of this world, and if we make ourselves available He will use us.

No work is too small, because God can multiply it. I have found that perhaps the most important and vital part of Release's ministry is prayer. We can all share in this. The best we can do is cry to God for our brothers and sisters but also say to Him: 'Here I am Lord, wholly available.'

If you feel that God is calling you to serve persecuted Christians as a Release volunteer, please call our Volunteer Co-ordinator Gene on 01689 823491



Birthed in prison



A distinctive of Release International is that it was born out of the prison cell.

Romanian pastor Richard

Wurmbbrand's experience of 14 years behind bars because of his Christian faith inspired the founding of the organisation. Suffering in prison for one's faith in Christ runs through Release like wording through seaside rock: it is part of our being.

That's why caring for prisoners of faith and their families is so central to our work and why in this edition we are celebrating a decade of dedicated ministry to those who have given up their freedom rather than deny Christ.

The world has changed markedly since the 1950s and 60s when Richard Wurmbbrand was in prison. Communism was the major threat to the free world back then; today many would say the biggest challenges to Christianity come from secularism and radical Islam.

However, one thing has stayed the same: Christians are still imprisoned for their faith.

Fifty years ago they would have been in communist cells behind the Iron Curtain, like Richard Wurmbbrand. Today they are locked up in North Korea, Eritrea, Iran, China, Pakistan, even Egypt and India. The charges that got them there might have changed, but the reasons fundamentally have not.

However, prison is nothing new for those who consider the gospel more important than their freedom.

In the Book of Acts, Paul the Apostle, Peter and Silas spend various amounts of time in jail. It is a place of refining and witness but also a place of encountering God in a special way that we who are physically free rarely do.

One Iranian Christian lady thought God had left her after she came out of prison because His presence was so real to her in the cell.

So as we celebrate ten years of ministry to prisoners with this special edition of *Release*, let's remember that we are also ministered to by those in prison.

Their willingness to sacrifice for the gospel should encourage us to stand firm for Christ wherever we are. Their willingness to go to prison because of their witness for Christ should spur us on in evangelism – and their willingness to suffer behind bars for Jesus simply confirms the truth of the gospel.

As you read the special Prisoners pages please allow God to speak to you. He may want you to respond by supporting those in prison for their faith through prayer or financial giving, but He may also want to use their stories to encourage you in your walk with Him.

Paul Robinson CEO



The **Word** on persecution

GOD AT WORK

Humanly speaking, being imprisoned for your faith might seem a most dispiriting, demoralising and frustrating experience.

To be separated from family and friends and to be denied one's freedom can also be a real challenge to faith, particularly when an active faith and a desire to serve the Lord has been the cause of being locked away.

And yet, as Christians have testified to since New Testament times God is not absent from the prison cell. Like life in general, God will occasionally work in spectacular ways, but more often in providential ways.

In the Book of Acts, for example, God worked dramatically through an earthquake while the Apostle Paul was in prison; an event that led directly to the conversion of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:25-34).

Years later, when in prison in Rome, Paul could see the Lord working in a different way. As he wrote to Christians in Philippi:

'I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ' (Philippians 1:12-13, ESV).

The writings of Richard Wurmbbrand, who inspired the founding of Release, give powerful testimony to the way God was at work during his years of imprisonment and torture, and more recent accounts of Christians in prison for their witness have done the same.

No Christian would choose to be imprisoned for their faith and gospel witness, and it is right to pray for and to work for the release of those who have been. But let us never forget that though the Christian may be captive – the Lord isn't.



FOUNDATIONS

'Atheists believe they put me in jail. I believe God sent me there, to allow me to delve more deeply into the truths concealed within His words.'

Pastor Richard Wurmbbrand was imprisoned for 14 years in communist Romania in the 1950s and 1960s. He inspired the founding of Release International in 1968 to serve persecuted Christians and to make the church in the West aware of their suffering.

'Neither walls, nor barbed wire, nor prison, nor suffering, nor loneliness, nor enemies, nor pain, nor even death separates us from the Lord and each other.'

Iranian Christian
prisoner Farshid Fathi

Pastor Farshid Fathi was detained in 2010 by the Iranian authorities and sentenced to six years' imprisonment for 'acting against national security'. He has suffered poor health during his incarceration in Evin prison, Tehran.

Your gift can make a real difference to Christian prisoners of faith such as Farshid, and to their families, who may have to endure years of separation.

Please help us to support those on the frontline of Christian ministry.

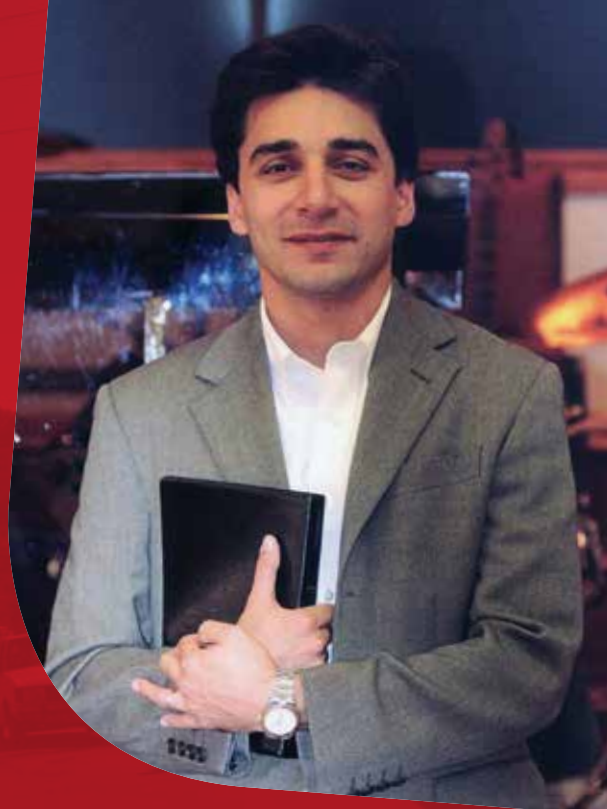


Photo: Elam Ministries.

Through our international network of missions, Release International serves persecuted Christians in more than 30 countries around the world by supporting pastors and Christian prisoners, and their families; supplying Christian literature and Bibles; and working for justice.

 **YES** I want to support persecuted Christians around the world. Please send me regular information.

☐ Here is my gift of £_____ (please make cheques payable to Release International)

Please use my gift: ☐ where most needed or ☐ to help Christian prisoners of faith and their families

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SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2014

PULL OUT
AND PRAY



Bomb attacks have forced people in Sudan's Nuba Mountains to flee to camps like this one at Yida.

September 2014

Heavenly Father

Lord, I thank you for your word which tells me that 'blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'.

I praise you, Lord, that you are outside time. Please help persecuted Christians to have your perspective on their suffering.

Lord, I thank you that you have the victory over suffering and death, and that one day they will share fully in that victory too.

Father God, be with my fellow Christians who are grieving or in pain for your name's sake today. Teach us all, Father, to see how your strength is made perfect in our weakness.

Amen

Sudan

Monday 1: Please pray that God's peace and presence will be with Christians in Sudan, where persecution is increasing. The Government is determined to enforce a stricter form of *Sharia* (Islamic law). Pray that Christians will hold on to His promise that 'He shields all who take refuge in Him' (Psalm 18:30).

Tuesday 2: Pray that God will continue to protect and restore Meriam Yahia Ibrahim and her family. The Sudanese Christian was convicted of 'apostasy' and 'adultery' and forced to give birth in custody. Meriam was later acquitted on appeal and was able to leave Sudan in July.

Wednesday 3: Pray for an end to aerial bombardments of civilian targets in villages

in the Nuba Mountains in South Kordofan, southern Sudan. One of the reasons for the bombings is to kill or drive out Christians and non-Arabs. Many have sought refuge in caves or camps such as Yida (see photo).

Thursday 4: Pray for the family and friends of those killed by recent bomb attacks on villages in Um Dorain County in South Kordofan. Four children were among the dead; at least five church buildings were also bombed.

Friday 5: The Government in Khartoum recently announced it will not issue permits for the building of new churches, claiming that existing churches are sufficient for Sudan's Christian population. Pray that God will multiply His church in Sudan.

'Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow-prisoners, and those who are ill-treated as if you yourselves were suffering.' Hebrews 13:3

Iraq

Saturday 6: Pray for Christians who remain in Iraq, including Release partner Canon Andrew White, the 'vicar of Baghdad'. Pray that they will hold on to God's word that He is 'our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble' (Psalm 46:1).

Sunday 7: Pray for wisdom for Christian leaders in Iraq. Pray that they will know God's guidance as they continue to minister to dwindling congregations.

Monday 8: Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIS) rebels are imposing strict *Sharia* on territories they have seized. They have reportedly confiscated Christian property in places such as the northern city of Mosul. Pray that their efforts to establish a Caliphate spanning Syria and Iraq will be thwarted.

'The Christian centre of Iraq has been totally ransacked.'

Canon Andrew White, 'vicar of Baghdad'.

Tuesday 9: Pray God's protection over Christians from Mosul who were forced to abandon their city and their homes in July after IS rebels told them to convert, leave or face execution. Pray that Christians will soon be able to return to this city.

Wednesday 10: Many Christians have fled Iraq altogether or have sought refuge in the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region. Pray that Christians will be able to return to their homes in Iraq and live in peace and in harmony with their neighbours.

Iraq in focus:

- Persecution of Christians has been relentless since the downfall of Saddam Hussein. Christians have been killed and their churches attacked by extremists.
- Christians say low-level persecution and harassment have continued under the rule of Prime Minister Nour al-Maliki and his Shia-dominated Iraqi army.
- Sunni IS rebels now pose a new threat to Christians, in their attempts to establish a Caliphate.

(Source: Release)

Thursday 11: Thank God that Kurdistan has said it will grant Christians a safe haven and religious liberty. Pray that Kurdish officials will keep their word: Christians in Kurdistan have faced restrictions in the past, and believers with a Muslim background remain at risk.

Friday 12: Thiar fled Baghdad when extremists killed 52 members of his church – including his son – in 2010. He and his family fled for Qaraqosh, a Christian enclave close to Kurdistan, but now live in fear of extremist attack. Pray that God will restore this family's hope and establish them in a safe home.



Christians in Kurdistan enjoy relative religious freedom compared with the rest of Iraq.

Kenya

Saturday 13: Pray that churches in eastern Kenya will hold fast to God's promises and know His presence in the wake of several extremist attacks. Pray for wisdom for all church leaders, and that the authorities will work with them to protect these vulnerable communities.

Sunday 14: Pray for repentance on the part of *Al Shabaab* and associated extremist groups who are attacking Christian targets in Kenya. Extremists say they are avenging Kenya's military involvement in neighbouring Somalia where it is heading up efforts to oust *Al Shabaab*.

Monday 15: Pray for the church in Mpeketoni, a predominantly Christian town where gunmen killed at least 57 people on June 15. *Al Shabaab* militants have admitted responsibility for the attack.

Tuesday 16: In the June attack on Mpeketoni, attackers reportedly went door-to-door asking residents their religion and killed them if they answered 'Christian'. Pray that Christians in Kenya will not be cowed and will continue to declare their faith in Christ boldly.

Wednesday 17: Pray for all those injured and bereaved in brutal attacks by suspected Islamist extremists on the mainly Christian villages of Hindi and Gamba, eastern Kenya, in July. More than 30 people died. Attackers reportedly told non-Muslims to leave the area or convert to Islam.

Thursday 18: Pray especially for all those traumatised by attacks by Islamist extremists armed with machetes and guns. One survivor from Hindi village in Lamu County described how her husband was tied to his bed and their house set alight.

Friday 19: Ask God to protect Hassan Hussein Mohammed, a recent convert to Christianity from Islam. He has not been seen since he was arrested in western Kenya; Christian leaders fear he is mistakenly being held as a 'terror suspect' because he is from northern Kenya and has a Muslim background.

China

Saturday 20: Pray for Pastor Zhang Shaojie and his family. The pastor of Nanle County Christian Church in Henan province was recently sentenced to a total of 12 years in jail for 'fraud' and 'gathering a crowd to disrupt public order'. His daughter and her family have fled to the US.

Sunday 21: Thank God for the recent release of two more members of Nanle County Christian Church in China's Henan province: Zhao Guoli and Wu Guishan. They had been detained since November. Pray for the release of four other members who remain in custody.

Monday 22: Pray for the Liangren house church in Guangzhou, Guangdong province, which has suffered intense persecution for months from officials in the neighbouring Guangxi region. The persecution appears to be in retaliation for a church outreach to the region.

Tuesday 23: Pray for the release of several staff members of Liangren house church in Guangzhou. Also, several kindergartens and businesses linked to the church have been raided or shut down, causing church members severe financial difficulties: ask the Lord to meet their needs.

Wednesday 24: Officials in Zhejiang province, east China, are continuing their campaign to demolish or modify 'illegal buildings' in the

province. They recently pulled down a ten-storey 'mega-church', the Xiaying Holy Love church in Ningbo, which opened only last September.

Sri Lanka

Thursday 25: Pray for the church in Sri Lanka where persecution is on the increase. Pray that Christians will stand firm in their faith.

Friday 26: Pray for a pastor and three members of his congregation who had to be hospitalised after a mob attacked a Christian home in Madu village in Sri Lanka's Mannar district in June.

Saturday 27: In Kandy district, a Christian woman was hospitalised for two days after being brutally attacked by a mob as she prayed for a family. She was later charged with 'forced conversion'. Pray that all charges against her will be dropped; pray too her faith will remain strong.

Sunday 28: Pray for the pastor of the Christian Fellowship of Bulathkohupitiya in Kegalle district who was recently questioned by officials over prayer meetings held at his home. He was told he needed official permission to continue the meetings, despite there being no legal requirement for him to do so.

Monday 29: Ask God for wisdom and protection for the pastor of the Assemblies of God Church in Angunukolapalassa, Hambanthota district. Police have told him to stop all worship activities – or leave the village.

Tuesday 30: In July Buddhist hard-liners joined by Hindu priests warned evangelical churches in the town of Polonnaruwa to stop their outreach into local villages or face legal action for 'forced conversion'. Praise God that His word 'will not return void' (Isaiah 55:11).

October 2014

Egypt

Wednesday 1: Pray that Egypt's Government will take firm action to uphold religious liberties for all citizens and intervene to stop the persecution of minorities such as Christians. Churches were attacked after the removal of President Morsi.

Thursday 2: Kirolos Shawqi, 29, a Christian from Luxor, was sentenced to six years in jail – simply for 'liking' a Christian forum on Facebook. He was convicted of 'blasphemy' and 'inciting sectarian violence' in June. Pray that he will be acquitted on appeal.

Friday 3: Pray for God's peace and protection over Egyptian teacher, Dimyana Abd Al-Nour, who was sentenced to six months in prison for

'blasphemy' after primary school students and parents complained about her social studies class. Dimyana has fled abroad.

Saturday 4: Pray for Egyptian Christian Bishoy Boulos (formerly known as Mohammed Hegazy) who is awaiting a retrial on charges of 'inciting sectarian violence' by 'false information'. He has also now been detained on 'blasphemy' charges for trying to change his religious status on his ID card.

Nigeria

Sunday 5: Continue to pray for wisdom and courage for Nigerian politicians and military responding to the extremist threat posed by *Boko Haram*. Pray that they will act decisively to protect the vulnerable Christian minority in the north.

Monday 6: Continue to pray for the release of the schoolgirls abducted by Islamist extremists *Boko Haram* from Borno, north-east Nigeria. Pray that God's presence will be with the girls and their families.

Tuesday 7: Other groups of women and girls have been abducted by *Boko Haram* in Borno state, despite a heavy security presence there. Pray that these women and girls too will be freed and returned home.

Wednesday 8: Ask God to strengthen the faith of persecuted congregations in northern Nigeria which have been attacked by *Boko Haram*. At least 40 people were killed in raids in June.

Thursday 9: Pray for the leaders of *Boko Haram* whose stated aim is to impose Taliban-style *Sharia* across the whole of Nigeria. Some fear that their actual objective may be to split the mainly Muslim north from the predominantly Christian South.

Friday 10: Release has been gathering signatures for a petition, to be presented to the Nigerian High Commission in London this autumn. Pray that the Nigerian Government will heed its call for greater protection for vulnerable Christian communities in the run-up to presidential and National Assembly elections next February.

Saturday 11: Pray for those injured or bereaved by suicide bombings in the northern city of Kano and in the central Plateau state capital, Jos, in May. About 20 people died in Kano; the blast in Jos claimed at least 118 lives.

Pakistan

Sunday 12: Pray that officials in Pakistan will ensure that justice is done for all citizens. All too often, Pakistani Christians are treated as second-class citizens and denied justice. Continue to pray for the repeal of the blasphemy laws which are misused to persecute Christians.

Monday 13: Continue to pray for the acquittal on appeal of Punjabi Christian Asia Bibi. She has been waiting for three years for her appeal against a death sentence for



Churches such as this one in Minya were a target for attack by Muslim Brotherhood supporters after the overthrow of President Morsi.

blasphemy to be heard. The farm labourer has been detained since 2010.

Tuesday 14: Pray for the family of Christian teenager Sanwal Masih, who died after reportedly being raped and poisoned by a relative of his employer in Gujranwala. Thank God that Release partners are able to provide spiritual, legal and financial support to the family. Pray for justice for Sanwal.

Wednesday 15: Pray for justice for the family of Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti, who was assassinated in March 2011. Three years on, Islamist extremists have silenced prosecution witnesses in the Christian's murder trial with threats, while the prime suspect was released on bail in July.



Pastor Farshid Fathi was injured when Revolutionary Guards beat inmates in Evin prison.

India

Thursday 16: The election victory earlier this year for India's right-wing BJP party has sparked fears that extremist Hindu attacks against religious minorities, including Christians, will escalate. Pray that these fears will prove groundless.

Friday 17: India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, stands accused of failing to prevent the 2002 religious riots in his home state of Gujarat, which claimed the lives of more than 1,000 people, mainly Muslims. Pray that he will work hard to prove his critics wrong and uphold the rights of religious minorities throughout India.

Saturday 18: Pray for 100 Christians in Sirisguda, Chhattisgarh state, who were attacked by Hindu extremists when they dared to challenge their village chief's decision to deny them food rations because of their faith. Ten believers had to be hospitalised after the vicious assault. Pray for an end to discrimination against these Christians.

Sunday 19: The day after the attack on Sirisguda Christians (above) the village head declared that villagers should embrace Hinduism or their lands would be seized.

Thank God for the courage of Christians who have stayed. 'They may kill us, but we are not going to leave Jesus,' said one.

Monday 20: Pray that church leaders in India will have success in urging officials to reverse a ban on non-Hindu religious activity that has been adopted by more than 50 villages in Bastar district, Chhattisgarh. Some villages have imposed a ban on non-Hindus even entering the areas.

Tuesday 21: Hindu extremists told Antu Ram of Kue Mari village, Chhattisgarh, that they would burn down his house if he did not pay a fine of 2,000 rupees (£20) for adhering to his Christian faith. He paid up – but they burned down his house anyway. Pray for Ram and his family, now 'living under a plastic sheet', say Christian leaders.

Wednesday 22: Pray that moderate Hindus in rural villages in India will not be cowed by extremists into opposing minority Christians, but will rather stand up for harmony and religious tolerance.

Iran

Thursday 23: Pray for the release of all Christian prisoners in Iran, many of whom are pastors. Pray that God will heal and strengthen them. Pray that their guards will be touched by their witness.

Friday 24: Pray for the families and friends of Christian prisoners of faith in Iran. Pray that they will find comfort in their church fellowships and in God's presence.

Saturday 25: Prisoner of faith Vahid Hakkani has reportedly been on hunger strike twice

since March, in protest at a court's refusal to grant him and two others conditional release. Please ask God to keep Vahid in good health and pray that he will be released.

Sunday 26: Continue to pray for the release of Pastor Behnam Irani who recently had a spell in solitary confinement after he objected to a summons from the Revolutionary Tribunal over 'communicating with the media'; he was also assaulted.

Monday 27: US-Iranian Saeed Abedini was transferred to hospital in mid-March after suffering abuse in custody; he was then beaten in hospital and forcibly returned to Rajai Shahr Prison in May. Ask God to strengthen and sustain Saeed; pray for his release.

Tuesday 28: Thank God that Mohammad-Reza Partovi, also known as Korosh, has been freed from custody. He was sentenced to three years and eight months for his Christian activities in February 2012 but was granted conditional release because he had completed more than half his sentence.

Wednesday 29: Pray for Pastor Silas Rabbani, who was arrested in May and who has reportedly been tortured in Gohardasht prison, near Karaj. Sources say he has been accused of 'apostasy' though not formally charged.

Thursday 30: Pray for full healing for Pastor Farshid Fathi (pictured) who has had no further treatment since his foot was put in a cast at Easter. His foot was fractured and toe broken when Revolutionary Guards raided Tehran's Evin Prison in April, beating prisoners.

Friday 31: Continue to pray for Iran's President, Hassan Rouhani. Pray that he and his Government will work hard to improve their nation's record on religious liberty.

Lord Jesus,

I thank and praise you, Lord, that you were willing to die for me, to suffer on the cross so that I might share eternity with you.

Jesus, thank you that you understand fully what my persecuted brothers and sisters are experiencing as they suffer in your name.

Be with them, Lord, and may they know your peace and your presence.

Amen

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India in focus

- Christians make up less than 6 per cent of India's population.
- Hindu nationalists have been open and violent in opposing the church. Militants have murdered several pastors, beaten others and attacked churches.
- Persecution has been particularly intense in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka states.

(Source: Release)

For more information on these and other countries where Release works, go to the 'Country profiles' page at www.releaseinternational.org

Sources: BBC, China Aid, Christian Today, CNN, CSW, International Christian Concern, Middle East Concern, Mohabat News, Morning Star News, Persecution Project Foundation, Release partners and contacts, *The Independent*, *The Telegraph*, UCA News, VOM USA.

www.releaseinternational.org

Release International, PO Box 54, Orpington BR5 9RT
Tel: 01689 823491 Email: info@releaseinternational.org
Registered Charity 280577

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international
voice of persecuted Christians