

Boko Haram abducted 276 girls, mostly Christian, from the Government Girls Secondary School, Chibok, Borno State in April 2014. Around 170 girls have subsequently escaped, been rescued or released.

A church in Owo in south-western Ondo State reopened on Easter Sunday, 9 April, ten months after at least 40 worshippers were killed in an attack on Sunday 5 June 2022. In a sermon to mark the reopening, Bishop Jude Arogundade called on the government to do more to prevent such attacks. “Almost on a daily basis we hear people being killed in their tens and hundreds,” he said. “Many people have even forgotten what happened in this church ten months ago, because many more [attacks] have happened without the world paying attention.”

Such statements have been strongly supported by a new report published by the Kukah Centre, founded by Matthew Hassan Kukah, a senior church leader in Sokoto State. The report states that more than 1,350 Christians were killed in northern and Middle Belt Nigeria from

1 February 2022 to 31 January 2023. It also concluded that this violence is the result of anti-Christian persecution by Islamist extremists.

Give thanks for the rescue of Hauwa and Esther. Pray that both young women will recover from their lengthy, traumatic ordeal, asking also for the Lord’s blessing upon their young children, and that He will remove the scars from their harrowing start to life. Ask the Lord to administer His healing touch on these families as they seek to rebuild their lives by trusting in Him (Exodus 15:26). Pray also for around 100 “Chibok girls” who have not returned home that they too will regain their freedom. Give thanks for the reopening of the church in Owo. Pray that the community will grow strong in faith as they meet together. Ask the Lord to sustain His Church in Nigeria, and fill His people with His overcoming Spirit whatever persecution confronts them. Pray that He will surround His people with protection from the ever-present threat of violence in the north and Middle Belt.

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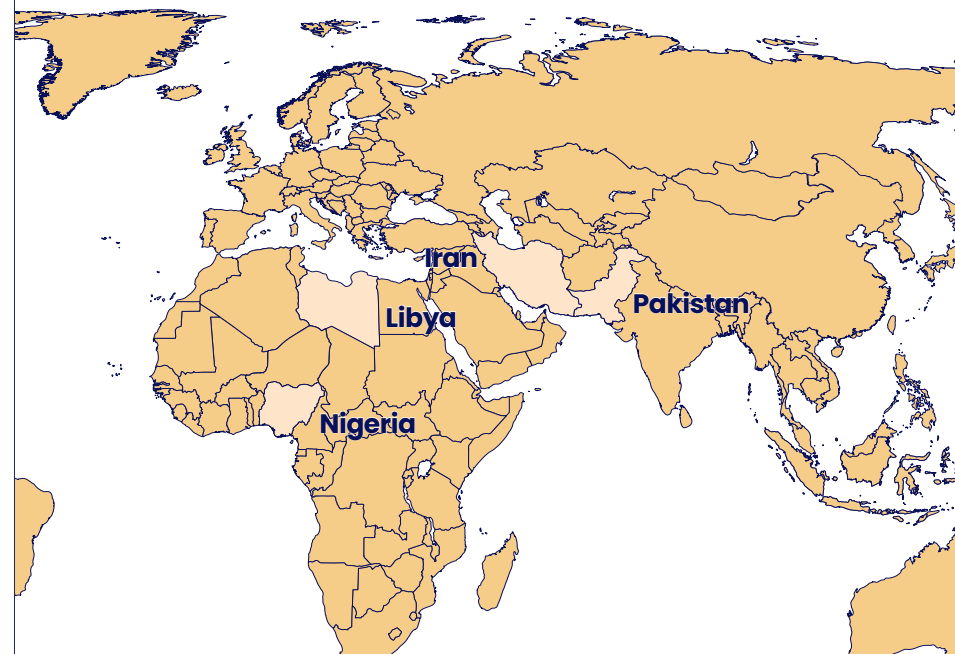
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Iran – Prayers answered as Christian couple are acquitted and released from prison

Your prayers have been answered (see *Prayer Focus Update*, May 2023) with the wonderful news of the release from prison of Iranian Christian converts Homayoun Zhavah, 64, and his wife Sara Ahmadi, 45.

Homayoun and Sara, who were serving terms of two and eight years, respectively, for their involvement in a “house church”, were granted their request for a review of their case, which took place on 9 May.

The judge at Branch 34 of Tehran’s appeal court ruled that there was “no

evidence” that Homayoun and Sara had acted against national security and acquitted them. They were released the same day.

The judge ruled that there was nothing suspicious about the Christian activities of Homayoun and Sara. Gathering with other Christians was, said the judge, entirely “natural”. Having books about Christianity was merely “an extension of their beliefs”. There was “no evidence” that the couple posed a threat to national security. He added that the law did not recognise as criminal activity the participation in “home-groups” to promote Christianity.

This ruling is highly significant. Worship in Iran’s majority language Farsi

(Persian) is forbidden, as is any Christian evangelism. Farsi-speaking Christians are often charged with “acting against national security” for their activities in unofficial “house churches” – or what the judge in his ruling referred to as “home-groups”.

Homayoun, who has advanced Parkinson’s disease, and Sara, who is his main carer, had been in prison since August 2022 (see *Prayer Focus Update*, September 2022).

The couple were originally arrested and detained in June 2019 and sentenced in November 2020. When they responded to a summons to begin their sentences in June 2021 they were sent home, before being jailed again in August 2022. Their first two applications for a retrial – in June 2021 and November 2021 – were rejected.

Praise the Lord for the answer to persistent prayer with the acquittal of Homayoun and Sara (Luke 11:5-13). Pray that they will recover fully from their ordeal, and that Homayoun receives the treatment he needs. Give thanks for the insight received by the appeal court judge that revealed that the Christian couple were above reproach (Titus 2:8). Pray that this ruling will be a precedent that allows more Christians to be released and prevents others from being targeted by the authorities.

Pakistan – Illiterate Christian woman arrested for “blasphemy”; Christian wedding photographer faces “blasphemy” charges

Two separate accusations of “blasphemy” within two weeks of each other have been levelled at Christians in the same district in Pakistan.

A Christian woman and a Muslim man were arrested and charged with “blasphemy” in the Pakpattan District of Punjab, on 19 April. Musarrat Bibi and her colleague, Mohammad Sarmad, were asked to clear a

store room at the school where they both worked. They gathered waste paper that had been discarded in the store room and burnt it.

As both Musarrat and Mohammad are illiterate, they did not realise that some of the pages contained Arabic verses from the Quran. School pupils and residents in the district raised the alarm and informed the police. Pakistan’s “blasphemy” laws stipulate life imprisonment for desecration of the Quran.

Less than two weeks later in the same district, a Christian wedding photographer and the Muslim couple who hired him were accused of “blasphemy”. Khurram Yousaf, 40, was asked to take photos of the newlywed couple at the Shrine of Baba Fariduddin, a Muslim site, on 30 April, but he and the couple were accused of desecrating the site by a member of the shrine’s management who reported the incident to the police. Khurram is now in hiding.

Give thanks that Musarrat and Mohammad did not suffer mob violence, which is often stirred up in such cases. Ask that the Judge of all the earth will effect a just outcome for both workers (Genesis 18:25). Pray for Khurram and the Muslim couple, that they and their families will not face any mob violence and that the authorities will not be persuaded to pursue the accusations against them. Pray especially for our sister Musarrat and brother Khurram, as Christians and other religious minorities are particularly vulnerable to accusations of “blasphemy”.

Libya – Six Christians arrested on apostasy charges

Six Libyan Christians who were arrested separately earlier this year are facing the possibility of the death penalty as apostates for having converted from Islam. They are also accused of proselytising others in the Muslim-majority country.

The six Libyans have been charged under article 207 of the penal code, which stipulates the death penalty for anyone promoting views that aim to “alter fundamental constitutional principles, or the fundamental structures of the social order”, or overthrow the state. Anyone found in possession of books, leaflets, drawings, slogans “or any other items” that support such a cause is punishable by life imprisonment.

Libya’s Internal Security Agency said in a statement that it had issued the arrests to “stop an organised gang action aiming to solicit and to make people leave Islam”.

One of the six Christians is a 22-year-old woman who released a video explaining her conversion to Christianity at the age of 15.

A seventh Muslim-background believer is thought to be still on death row after being sentenced to death for apostasy in September 2022 (see *Prayer Focus Update*, October 2022).

Libya’s interim constitution (2011) declares Islam the state religion and sharia (Islamic law) the principal source of legislation, but it also guarantees non-Muslims the freedom to practise their religion.

Intercede for our Libyan brothers and sisters as they suffer for their faith. Pray that the Lord will impress on them the eternal glory to which they are called, and will restore, confirm, strengthen and establish them as they look to His transforming grace (1 Peter 5:10). Ask for a Divine intervention that persuades the authorities that Christianity is not a threat to society. Pray that the death sentence will not be carried out in any of these cases.

food.gives – Shipments of aid sent to three African countries

Amongst numerous shipments that have been sent to aid suffering Christians as part of our food.gives programme around

the world, a container of food.gives aid has been dispatched from the UK and has arrived in South Sudan.

Another container of soup mix has arrived in Namibia from the US and the contents have been prepared for onward distribution. A shipment of lentils from Australia has been unloaded in Zimbabwe and, at the time of writing, distribution was in process.

Praise God for the successful arrival of food.gives boxes in South Sudan and pray for their safe distribution. Ask that the conflict in neighbouring Sudan will not spill over and impede or delay the process. Pray for the protection and welfare of many refugees, including Christians, who have fled from Sudan into South Sudan. Give thanks for the arrival of the containers in Namibia and Zimbabwe and pray that aid will sustain believers in these countries physically and mightily encourage them in their faith. Pray for God’s blessing on the many .gives operations in progress or being planned around the world.

Nigeria – Two more “Chibok girls” rescued; Ondo church reopens; Report documents killing of more than 1,350 Christians

Two more of the “Chibok girls” abducted by Boko Haram Islamist terrorists in April 2014 were rescued by the Nigerian military on 21 April 2023.

Hauwa Maltha and Esther Marcus, both 26, were each forced to marry Boko Haram fighters three times during their captivity. Hauwa has four children – she was eight months pregnant with the fourth at the time she was found, and has since given birth safely to a baby boy. Esther had a one-year-old baby with her when she was found.