

11:2) in making best use of these premises to glorify God.

### Indonesia – President defends minorities' freedom of worship

Encouraging news has emerged from Indonesia, where the president of the world's largest Muslim-majority nation has spoken out on behalf of the country's religious minorities.

During a meeting with heads of provinces and districts on 17 January, President Joko Widodo reminded local authorities that they should be upholding religious freedom. He said that Christians and other non-Muslims "have the same right to worship. They have the same rights in terms of freedom of religion and worship."

Widodo specifically highlighted the role of the Forum for Religious Harmony in each region, which often makes decisions – such as forbidding the construction of church buildings and other places of worship – that he argued are contrary to the constitution.

The president also called for the 2006 Joint Ministerial Decree to be

revoked. This legislation currently requires minorities to secure the approval of other religious groups before building a house of worship. Widodo said this regulation "violated the constitution".

Halili Hasan, research director of the Setara Institute for Democracy and Peace, a research and advocacy institute for religious freedom, praised the president's speech as "one of the strongest messages conveyed openly" in calling for removal of obstacles to the establishment of places of worship. Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism are all officially recognised religions in Indonesia.

**Thank the Lord** for President Joko's determination to honour Indonesia's state-promoted commitment to religious freedom and national unity. Pray that his message will be heeded throughout the country. Ask that Christians will be permitted to pursue plans for church-building and live out their faith, knowing that God is in control.

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## Prayer Focus Update

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### Syria – Aid arrives three days after earthquake

Barnabas has delivered food, blankets and other aid to Christian survivors of the devastating Turkey-Syria earthquake, which struck on 6 February and, at the time of writing, has killed more than 40,000 people.

The distribution of 1,500 food.gives boxes containing rice, lentils, chickpeas, bulgar wheat, noodles, beans and salt to families in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo began on 9 February, just three days after the quake. We also gave out several hundred pairs of new shoes.

A second consignment, containing 1,200 food parcels, 1,000 blankets, 250 health kits and 200 coats, quickly followed, distributed to help Christians in northern Syria who lost everything when the 7.8 magnitude quake struck. Blankets and heaters are also being distributed to Christian survivors in Turkey.

By the time you read this, God willing, further aid through food.gives will have been directed to earthquake victims. This includes containers of food from Germany and the Netherlands, and a container of dried soup mix from the United States.

**Pray that** God will have mercy on all who have been affected by this terrible catastrophe. Pray for the success of ongoing relief efforts throughout the region, especially the continued swift and efficient arrival and distribution of aid to our brothers and sisters in Syria and Turkey. Ask for strength, peace and hope for all and especially for our fellow-Christians, who have endured so much as a minority community on top of all the other suffering of recent years. Ask that the God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3) will be close to His people and enable them to rebuild their lives confident in His sustaining grace.

## **Nagorno-Karabakh – Barnabas gets aid through to Christian-majority region despite blockade**

Prayers are needed for our brothers and sisters in the Christian-majority region of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenian Christian enclave, lying within Azerbaijan's territory, was cut off from Armenia on 12 December 2022 when Azerbaijani protesters blockaded the only access route, the mountain road known as the Lachin Corridor. At the time of writing the blockade is continuing.

Residents of Nagorno-Karabakh are suffering shortages of fuel, medicines, hygiene products, and especially food. Power and energy outages have further added to their suffering.

Most of Azerbaijan's small Christian community, around 3% of the population, live in Nagorno-Karabakh (mountainous Karabakh) which was placed within Azerbaijan by the USSR in 1923. The region has been largely self-governing since the end of the first Nagorno-Karabakh war in 1994.

**Give thanks** that Barnabas has been able to get aid into the blockaded region, and ask that this will continue. Pray that the Lord will remove obstacles in His path to reopen the highway (Isaiah 57:14). Pray for a resolution that will allow Armenian Christians in Nagorno-Karabakh to live in peace.

## **Cameroon – Help reaches nearly 8,000 displaced Christians as Boko Haram violence kills three**

Christians forced to flee attacks by Boko Haram Islamist militants in Far North Cameroon have received Barnabas-funded aid.

Supplies of corn, soap and bleach were given to 1,327 families (7,962 people) who fled with nothing when they were driven from their homes just before harvest.

In addition to the food aid, 100 widows each received a bag of beans and 20 litres of oil. These ingredients can be used by the widows to make fritters, which can be sold to earn an income.

We also provided 100 young women with 50 sewing machines to start businesses in pairs. "God has answered my prayers," said one of the young women. "This will help me pay for my schooling and that of my little sister."

In separate instances elsewhere in the region during January 2023, three Christians were killed by jihadists. Our contacts in the region reported six attacks on churches by Boko Haram. The terrorists also looted and burned houses, causing many to flee.

**Praise God** for the distribution of aid to our brothers and sisters displaced by violence in northern Cameroon. Pray that attacks by Boko Haram on Christians will cease. Ask that the widows and young women will be successful in earning a living and enabled to provide for their families. Pray that the Lord will comfort the bereaved and continue to provide for those who have been forced from their homes (Nahum 1:7).

## **D. R. Congo – At least 32 Christians killed in Sunday attacks by Islamists**

Islamist terrorists are believed to be responsible for attacks on separate Sundays in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) that killed at least 32 Christians.

Seventeen Christians were killed and 39 wounded in a church bombing in Kasindi, North Kivu province, in north-eastern DRC on Sunday 15 January. The DRC military has said that the attack was carried out by the Allied Democratic Forces, a jihadi group linked to Islamic State (IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh).

In the early hours of Sunday 29 January simultaneous attacks on three villages took place in neighbouring Ituri province in

which at least 15 people were killed. Local officials also attributed these deaths to the Islamist group.

North Kivu and Ituri provinces have been under a state of emergency since May 2021.

**Ask the Lord** to comfort those bereaved in the attacks on Christians, and to heal the wounded. Pray that He will enable His people in North Kivu and Ituri to stand firm in their faith (Colossians 1:23). Ask that He will bring an end to violence in DRC and bring peace and security to the region.

## **Turkey – Five Iranian Christian refugee families report abuse in "removal centres"**

Five Iranian Christian families, mostly converts from Islam, need our prayers as they face deportation from Turkey. The families – consisting of 17 people, including children as young as three – are currently being held in Turkish "removal centres".

The Christians reported being given no explanation for their detention, and later discovering that their translator had translated their statements to police incorrectly.

Deportation back to Iran would entail severe persecution for any Muslim-background Christians. Two are church leaders, and several others lead worship or help with the youth groups at their churches. One believer said that the Turkish authorities had "started a psychological game against us to force us to sign our deportation forms".

The families have been detained in camps in south-western Turkey, about two hours' drive from where they have been living. They have reported abuses such as unsanitary conditions, adulterated food and denial of medicine. Men are held separately from their wives and children and are allowed contact with them only

once a week, for 15 minutes, and in the presence of guards.

**Call out** to the Lord for the situation of our brothers and sisters to be alleviated swiftly, and that all their basic needs will be satisfied. Ask that the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16) will enable them to prevail, whatever psychological suffering they encounter. Pray that He will bring about their release from confinement (Acts 5:19) and that all families will find a safe place in which to settle and practise their faith.

## **Egypt – Government licenses 73 more churches**

Prayers continue to be answered in Egypt as the government has again granted licences to churches. On 24 January, the government committee overseeing the process licensed a further 73 churches and church-affiliated buildings.

This is the 25th batch of approvals made since the committee started work in 2017. The decision brings the number of churches granted licences to 2,599 out of the 3,730 that applied for registration after a Law for Building and Restoring Churches abolished Ottoman-era restrictions on church buildings in 2016.

This latest approval follows the licensing of 364 churches at the committee's last two meetings in 2022 (see *Prayer Focus Update*, June 2022 and November 2022).

**Give thanks** for answered prayer in the granting of licences and the supportive stance of Egypt's government towards the Christian community. Pray that the process will continue and that Christians in Egypt will have safe places in which to worship. Ask that church leaders will receive the Holy Spirit's wisdom (Isaiah