



## Iran – Convert summoned to start six-year sentence; Convert detained after unwarranted search

An Iranian Christian convert with physical disabilities received notice to begin her sentence in Evin Prison, Tehran, on 3 January. Mina Khajavi, 60, was summoned to begin a six-year term for “acting against national security by promoting ‘Zionist’ Christianity”. This kind of accusation is typically made against Iranian believers just for being active in “house churches”.

Mina was arrested in 2020 and sentenced in 2022 alongside Malihe Nazari, also sentenced to six years, and Pastor Joseph Shahbazian, who received a ten-year term. Both Joseph (see *Prayer Focus Update*, October 2023) and Malihe were released early from their sentences in 2023. However, Mina was deemed unfit to begin her sentence when her ankle was broken after she was run over by a car, an incident that has caused her to have metal plates fitted and walk with a limp. She was required to present herself to the prison within five days of the notice.

Elsewhere in Iran, another Christian convert remains in detention after being arrested on Christmas Eve, 24 December 2023. Esmail Narimanpour’s home in Dezful in western Iran was raided in a search conducted without a warrant, and Christian books were confiscated. He was allowed to telephone his family on Christmas Day to inform them that he was being held in Ahvaz, around 100 miles south of Dezful. Esmail was among several converts cleared of “propaganda” charges in 2021

but subsequently forced to attend Islamic classes.

**Call on** the Lord to sustain our sister and brother in their ordeals. Remember them in prayer as if together with them in prison (Hebrews 13:3). Pray that He will intervene to bring about early release for Mina and that her medical needs will be fully addressed. Pray for Esmail’s release and that he will quickly be reunited with his family and not subject to further harassment. Ask that the faith of Mina and Esmail will be strengthened through perseverance and that they will realise that they lack nothing as they depend on the Lord (James 1:2-4).

## Nigeria – Islamists kill at least 295 Christians in wave of Christmas Eve attacks in Plateau State; 14 killed in New Year’s Day assaults on Christians in Borno State

Your prayers are earnestly sought for our Christian family in Plateau State in Nigeria’s Middle Belt after an estimated 295 Christians were killed in a wave of well-coordinated attacks spanning Christmas Eve, 24 December 2023, in Bokkos and Barkin Ladi Local Government Areas (LGA).

Christian leaders responded with horror and dismay at the lack of intervention by the authorities to prevent the slaughter. Rev. Stephen Baba, Vice-President of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), questioned, “Why did security agencies fail to respond swiftly despite several distress calls? Why the choice of Christmas Eve for the attacks despite assurances from security

agencies to provide adequate security during the yuletide?”

“I was told today that these killers or herders actually sent letters to the villagers. They told them that they will not celebrate Christmas but will run away with their rice. So I am surprised they were not able to tell security agents or anybody about it,” declared Rev. Polycarp Lubo, the Plateau State CAN chairman.

The dead were mostly women and children including physically challenged people who were unable to run and were burned alive.

The attacks by Fulani Islamist militia groups began on the evening of 23 December and finished on the morning of Christmas Day.

Twenty-five remote and widely scattered villages were targeted. More than 1,500 homes were burned, eight churches destroyed, many hundreds of people injured and 30,000 displaced.

Two pastors were killed. One of them, Rev. Jonathan Daluk, in Tudun Mazat village, fled with his family but realising that his mother and brother were still back in the vicarage, went back for them and all three were killed.

Christians in these villages say they are looking up to God and the authorities for justice. “We do not and will not go for any reprisals or attacks ... The Lord is our help and our refuge,” said a pastor in Bokkos.

Further north, 14 men were killed in coordinated attacks by Islamist militants on Christian communities in Chibok LGA in Borno State on New Year’s Day, 1 January 2024. The attacks in Gatamwarwa and Ntisha followed a raid in Pemi on 19 December 2023, in which three men were killed. One

woman was abducted in the Ntisha attack. Several shops were burned down in the raids.

In neighbouring Yobe State Islamist terrorists Boko Haram are suspected of murdering Pastor Luka Levong in Geidam on 5 January. Pastor Luka was shot dead at around 2.00am along with Maina Abdullahi, the church's treasurer. Four others were also killed. Several houses and a church were burned down when the terrorists invaded the community.

**Lift up** to the Lord Christians in Plateau State who have experienced such dreadful loss. Pray that they will take refuge in Him and know His comfort as they grieve (Psalm 46:1). Ask that He will guide them how to rebuild their communities, especially those displaced by the violence. Pray that government and security agencies will increase in effectiveness in protecting vulnerable Christian communities. Ask for protection for the bereaved Christians in Borno State who have lost their menfolk. Pray for the families of Pastor Luka and Maina Abdullahi and the church now bereft of their leaders.

### **Mauritania – Christians released after arrests following baptism video**

Join Christians in Mauritania in giving thanks for answered prayer after believers arrested were released by 18 December 2023. At least 15 believers were arrested after a video of a baptism ceremony, held in the far south of the country in November, was posted on social media and led to protests calling for their killings.

The believers were instructed by officials to keep their beliefs private and discreet. "It seems that our brothers have more to fear from the Islamists than from their government," a Christian leader in the region said. "Thank God for this happy ending."

Mauritania is almost 100% Muslim and is one of the few countries in the world where apostasy is punishable by death in line with sharia (Islamic law), although no known executions

for leaving Islam have occurred in recent years.

**Praise God** for the Christians' release. Ask for protection for the small but growing number of Christian converts in Mauritania and pray for the repeal of laws that make both blasphemy and apostasy from Islam mandatory capital offences. Pray for wisdom and strength for the Church in Mauritania in seeking to grow amid such restrictions (Psalm 18:32).

### **Myanmar – Air strike targeting two churches kills at least 15 in Sagaing Region**

Christians in Myanmar are again in need of our prayers. At least 15 people were killed in an air strike by the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) that targeted two church buildings in Khampat township in Sagaing Region. Eight children were among the dead.

The strike hit Kanan, a village in the township at around 10.15am on Sunday 7 January. "It was a moment when people were either returning from or heading to church," a resident explained.

Witnesses reported that as many as 30 people were injured. Among the injured were children playing football at the sports ground, having attended Sunday school earlier that morning.

The church, a school building and eight houses were destroyed in the blasts.

**Pray for** an end to the targeted air strikes on Christians in Myanmar. Ask that the Lord will draw close to His people in their grief and provide healing to those wounded. Pray that the Christian community in Kanan will draw on the Lord's power and love and the counsel of the Holy Spirit as they seek to rebuild physically, spiritually and emotionally. Pray that the peace of Christ will rule in their hearts (Colossians 3:15).

### **China – Stringent Education Law comes into force**

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Patriotic Education Law came into force on 1 January 2024. The CCP issued guidelines as to how religious groups should follow the law.

The guidelines include the affirmation that the "state is greater than religion, and the state law is greater than religious rules".

Teaching must align with the thoughts of President of China Xi Jinping. Among the requirements of the law is that China's "religious circles must learn, think, and practise Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, especially General Secretary Xi Jinping's important expositions on religious work". The law applies not just to Chinese schools but to all sectors of Chinese society.

**Pray that** Christian leaders throughout China will be faithful to their calling to revere Christ Jesus as Lord in their hearts as they absorb the challenges of the new law (1 Peter 3:15).

### **Sudan – Church severely damaged by arson**

A church in Wad Madani, capital of Gezira State, was set on fire and suffered severe damage on 12 January.

Church leaders hold the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) accountable for the blaze, given their control over the city. Rev. Youssif Matar underlined the RSF's "moral and criminal responsibility for the incident". The RSF was prominent in the Islamist-led October 2021 coup and has faced accusations of mass killings of civilians in the Darfur region.

The church is the largest in the state and one of the oldest, having been built in 1939. The fire consumed the library which contained historical documents and devastated the main hall.

The RSF has been in control of Gezira State since 18 December 2023 following the withdrawal of the Sudanese army. It has been responsible for attacks on churches elsewhere in Sudan during the current conflict.

**Pray for** protection and resolve for the Christian community in Wad Madani and elsewhere in Sudan. Ask that the building will be repaired and that attacks on churches will cease. Pray that the Christian minority will stand firm amid the hostility experienced.

**"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." – Isaiah 41:10**

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