



Prayer for the Persecuted Church for September 1, 2023

Prayer for the Persecuted Church: Our Best Practices

- Our focus in this hour is on prayer for the global church, not ourselves or our local issues. We can talk and even pray for those other things after prayer meeting is over at 1:00 p.m.
- We strive to start our prayers by 12:10.
- We are blessed to have a growing number of praying people join us. Let's all offer short prayers throughout our prayer time, allowing time for everyone to pray out loud if they wish. We are blessed by prayers when we can hear them, but silent prayers from our people are as valued as spoken ones.
- Thank you for praying for the persecuted church. Encourage friends to pray, too!

Pray for imprisoned or kidnapped Christians

CHRISTIANS IN PRISON: This list is only a sample: CAMBODIA: Theary Seng; CHINA: Li Jie, Hang Xiaodong, Wang Qiang; John Cao, Yan Hwa, Goa Zhisheng, Wang Yi and Qin Derfu, Hao Zhiwei, Zhang Shaojie, Li Juncai, Lian Xu Liang; ERITREA: Meron Gebreselasie, Mussia Ezas, Dr. Kiffy Gebremeskel, Kidane Weldou, Haile Nayzgi; INDIA: Pastor Sawan; IRAN: Joseph Shahbazian; KAZAKHSTAN: Pastor Maximov; NORTH KOREA: Zhang Wen Shi PAKISTAN: Zafar Bhatti; VIETNAM: Nguyen Nang Tinh, Nguyen Trung Ton

KIDNAPPED VICTIMS: Raymond Koh, Gilbert Biswas, Leah Sharibu, Sarah Atef, Joshua Hilmya & wife Ruth Sitepu, Hormoz Diril (in Turkey)

This week I researched our prayer lists above and provided information about all but one on the list. Let's pray this week for them with more depth than just names on our lists. Our prayer meeting may have more quiet times as we absorb this information.

CHRISTIANS IN PRISON:

Theary Seng

From Radio Free Asia

American lawyer says he's worried about Theary Seng's health, safety

'She continues to be a threat to the government of Cambodia, which is ... why they're keeping her in jail.'

By Sovannarith Keo for RFA Khmer

2023.07.19

Outspoken Cambodian-American lawyer and human rights defender Theary Seng, 52, is currently on a 10-day hunger strike from a remote jail in northern Cambodia's Preah Vihear province.

Last June, she was sentenced to six years in

prison on treason charges that stemmed from abortive efforts in 2019 to bring about the return to Cambodia of opposition leader Sam Rainsy.

Her hunger strike began on Monday, five days after the U.N. Working Group on Arbitrary Detention issued a judgment calling her detention "arbitrary, politically motivated, and in violation of international law."

RFA Khmer Service spoke with her pro bono international human rights lawyer, Jared Genser, on Wednesday. He said he'll use the working group's report to build momentum for her case and to push for the United States to designate her case as "wrongfully detained" under the Levinson Act, a 2020 law that would allow sanctions to be imposed on individuals responsible for holding U.S. nationals hostage.

RFA: First of all, I want to know about Theary

Seng's condition in jail. We know that she launched a 10-day hunger strike in jail. How is it going now?

Jared Genser: We don't have any direct information yet. We understand that she will have a visit shortly from someone. I'm not going to name them for their own security, but we will know a little bit more in the next day or two.

She launched a 10-day hunger strike to protest her detention and that of other political prisoners and also to protest the forthcoming election, which with the disqualification of the Candlelight Party, quite clearly cannot be in any way considered free or fair. She is undergoing a kind of hunger strike where she'll drink liquids, water in particular.

But as her lawyer and her friend, I'm very worried about her health and safety. And obviously, she continues to be a threat to the government of Cambodia, which is, of course, why they're keeping her in jail, despite the fact that all she did to get six years in prison for so-called treason charges was to post some critical things about the government on Facebook.

RFA: We learned that on July 12, the U.N. Working Group on Arbitrary Detention issued a judgment calling the cases "arbitrary detention, politically motivated, and a violation of international laws." How significant is that and why did it take so long for the U.N. Working Group over a year after her arrest to issue this decision?

Jared Genser: I think in terms of the time frame for the U.N. to issue the decision, it's actually a pretty typical time frame. It feels like a long time and obviously has been a long time. But in fact, I think for international tribunals, it's quite quick. If you were to take a case to the Inter-American Commission and Court of Human Rights, it would be three to five years. The same for the European Court of Human Rights. So this is actually, for the international system, on the quicker side.

The working group, you know, undertook a very detailed analysis of the facts of the case, applied international law to those facts, and ultimately concluded that she was being detained illegally and in violation of international law, not only on the basis of her violation of her substantive

rights, her right to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly and political participation, but also in terms of just the egregious lack of due process in her trial.

And it has also called for her immediate and unconditional release. So I think that this will definitely help us as we work to build momentum, to put further pressure on Hun Sen and the regime going forward. I think, for that purpose, it's very valuable.

RFA: You mentioned about using her case with the U.N. Working Group to build momentum. How will you convince the U.S. government to consider her case under the Levinson Act?

Jared Genser: It's a strange set of circumstances because we literally have had President Biden urge Hun Sen to release her, Secretary Blinken to do the same. We've had Samantha Power of USAID and the U.S. ambassador to Cambodia and a spokesperson for the State Department all coming out, and they're using the word "unjustly detained" and all calling for her release.

So on the one hand, we have all the key officials from the very top down who have all urged Hun Sen to release her. And ultimately, that's the most important thing that's been going on, because at the end of the day, it makes very, very clear the position of the United States.

The bureaucratic process of the Levinson Act and making this formal determination is another matter. And it's very strange that just the State Department is trying to explain that they're calling for her release, the U.S. government calling for her release and that her detention is unjust. But that somehow being unjust is not the same as wrongful or unlawful. And this doesn't make any sense when you look at the words and their definitions at all.

And so, you know, we're going to have to continue to fight it out with the State Department. It does matter because we want her case referred to the office of the U.S. presidential envoy for hostage affairs, who can then work the case on a day to day basis.

And so I think that we're just going to keep pressing ahead with our efforts. And the U.S. government hopefully will catch up soon enough.

RFA: How hopeful is it that the U.S. government will do so and how will it be significant for the case if the U.S. government considers her case as wrongfully detained?

Jared Genser: So, I mean, at the end of the day, when you're trying to get any political prisoner out of jail anywhere in the world, you have to escalate the cost for the government above the benefits as much as possible.

Ultimately, with the U.N. judgment and with the State Department again just last week calling for her release, that will enable us to also engage governments in Europe and around the world on her behalf and will enable us to get higher level media attention.

RFA: My last question. Cambodians will go to polls on Sunday. Many national and international observers think that this election is a "sham election" whereby the ruling Cambodian People's Party is running unopposed. And then for Cambodian people, they seemingly have no options because the party that they love, the Candlelight Party, was disqualified from the election. The opposition leaders are calling for their supporters to go to vote but to spoil their ballots. If you were the Cambodian people, what would you do in such circumstances?

Jared Genser: Obviously, Hun Sen is going to try to do everything possible to increase turnout. I'm sure that government workers will be mandated to come and vote. The best scenario here would be to have the lowest possible turnout possible. At the end of day, though, I'm not going to believe any of the numbers coming out of the Cambodian electoral commission because the whole process has been rigged.

So, even if people come out or don't come out and refuse to turn out, I think the numbers are still going to show a large turnout because, you know, Hun Sen can report whatever numbers he wants and there'll be nobody to oppose those numbers.

I think that the best thing a Cambodian person could do in this case is to boycott the election. But that's obviously not a long term solution.

CHINA:

Li Jie and Wang Qiang,

from Christianpersecution.com

"Authorities Resume Investigation of Linfen Covenant House Church," by Yu Bing, China Aid, February 7, 2023:

(Linfen, Shanxi province—February 7, 2023) Chinese authorities decided to continue their so-called investigation concerning Linfen Covenant House Church. According to a prayer request from the church, this will cause the police to continue their persecution of church members.

FALSE CHARGES AND TESTIMONIES

During an outdoor family camp in August 2022, police arrested preachers of Linfen Covenant House Church—Li Jie and Han Xiaodong. Both of them were initially placed in residential surveillance at a designated location (RSDL) as authorities interrogated many believers of the church. Some coerced false confessions led to the arrest of Wang Qiang, a co-worker of the church. All three men were charged with "fraud," and all false testimonies claimed that Li, Han, and Wang "defrauded" congregants through tithings and offerings.

HISTORY OF SUFFERING PERSECUTION

Linfen Covenant House Church is the sister church of Zion Reformed Church in Taiyuan, Shanxi province. Like others of its kind in China, Linfen Covenant House Church faces ongoing persecution for not joining the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TPSM). In the Fall of 2018, Li Jie signed Pastor Wang Yi's "Joint Statement by Pastors: A Declaration for the Sake of the Christian Faith" along with over 400 Chinese pastors and leaders. Police questioned Preacher Li Jie multiple times and threatened to send his church's children to public school. Officers pressured Li by shutting off his power, water, and electricity. They went as far as evicting him and his family during the coldest day of winter.

WIFE OF WANG QIANG

Wen Huijuan, Wang Qiang's wife, was eight months pregnant on December 18, 2022. Her first pregnancy had some complications, indicating she may have difficulties with

her second baby. In a social media post, Wen described how much she needed her imprisoned husband. She publicly questioned why her kind, honest husband was accused of “fraud” for giving tithes and offering to the church.

On the afternoon of January 24, 2023, Wen Huijuan gave birth to a boy through c-section delivery

Hang Xiaodong

from ICC

0/06/2022 China (International Christian Concern) – On September 30, Preacher Li Jie and Preacher Han Xiaodong from Linfen Holy Covenant Church in Shanxi province, detained in August for the alleged crime of “fraud,” were formally arrested. ICC reports earlier that the house church leaders were taken away on Aug. 19 when dozens of church members were enjoying an outdoor family camp. Preacher Li Jie’s wife Li Shanshan, was also detained along with the leaders. She was only released on bail pending trial on September 3, after her lawyer had worked tirelessly to secure her freedom.

Preacher Han Xiaodong’s wife, Chen Ying, received the September 30 notice from Linfen City’s Public Security Bureau stating that Han Xiaodong was arrested at 4 pm for allegedly committing fraud. He is now detained at Yaodu District Detention Center. Chen is left to fend for herself and their three young children.

According to China Aid, Linfen Holy Covenant Church is the sister church of Xuncheng (Zion) Reformed Church in Shanxi’s Taiyuan. Due to the church leaders’ refusal to join the state-vetted Three-Self Church and Preacher Li Jie’s endorsement of ERCC Pastor Wang Yi’s 2018 “A Declaration for the Sake of the Christian Faith,” which calls for religious freedom in China, their church has been targeted in the latest religious crackdown.

John Cao

(Church in Chains)

Pastor John Cao (63) is serving a seven-year prison sentence in China’s Yunnan province for “organising illegal border crossings”

between China and Myanmar. A resident of North Carolina, he made many trips to his native China to establish schools and work among the poor before expanding his humanitarian work into Myanmar. He was detained on 5 March 2017 while returning to China from Myanmar and was sentenced a year later.

LATEST NEWS (FEBRUARY 2023): On 7 February Pastor John’s 87-year-old mother Sun Jinhuan visited him in prison in Kunming, Yunnan province. It was their first face-to-face meeting in over three years. He said to her, “Please tell fellow brothers and sisters from all over the world that I am healthy. Please, don’t worry about me.”

John, whose Chinese name is Cao Sanqiang, became a Christian in his 20s through an American family he met in China. He obtained a degree in English from Hunan Teachers College and a Masters of Divinity from the Alliance Seminary in Nyack, New York. He joined China Outreach Ministry and ministered to thousands of Chinese students in American universities before becoming a pastor in Greensboro, North Carolina. He then felt called to spend time in China, serving the poor and especially children.

Pastor John spent over two decades helping to establish schools in central and southern China, and in 2014 became involved in aid work in neighbouring Myanmar, where he set up 16 schools for over 2,000 impoverished ethnic minority children in Wa State in the north of the country. He also organised food and clothing donation programmes for the Wa and Kachin ethnic minorities in the region. He made regular trips into Myanmar to visit the schools, bringing volunteer Chinese Christian teachers from his schools in China.

They would enter Myanmar by crossing a river with notebooks, pencils and Bibles. These border crossings were made without restriction – the pastor’s son Ben told media, “My father claims that the authorities were aware of their operation in Myanmar and even helped them cross the border on occasion.”

However, on 5 March 2017 Pastor John and teacher Jing Ruxia were returning across the river from Myanmar when they saw Chinese security agents waiting for them on the shore. Before they were seized, the pastor threw his

mobile phone into the water to protect the identities of more than fifty Chinese teachers he had recruited. They were held for almost a year before being charged in February 2018 with “organising illegal border crossings”, a charge usually made against human traffickers.

On 9 February 2018, Jing Ruxia was sentenced to one year in prison and then released. In March 2018, Pastor John was sentenced to seven years in prison and fined 20,000 yuan (approximately €2,600). He began serving his sentence in Menglian County Detention Centre, Pu'er City, Yunnan province.

The pastor appealed, but the trial court repeatedly postponed his appeal hearing – the organisation China Aid suggested that the authorities were likely trying to string out the process in order to keep the pastor in prison for longer.

While waiting for his appeal to be heard, Pastor John was not allowed any visitors other than his lawyers, one of whom, Yang Hui, reported that the pastor was experiencing several health issues including digestion problems, back pain and toothache, and had lost more than 23 kilos. The lawyers reported that Pastor John was refused a Bible until September 2018, so he searched through the prison library for Bible passages, finding them in unexpected sources including Nietzsche's Essays and Uncle Tom's Cabin. He copied any he found onto unfolded toothpaste boxes and did the same for hymns, finding and copying the lyrics of Amazing Grace, Silent Night, Away in a Manger and Joy to the World. Pastor John eventually got a Bible in September 2018, with the help of his lawyers, who reported that his eyes filled with tears when he touched it for the first time.

Eventually, in July 2019, Pastor John's seven-year sentence was upheld. In August he was moved to a prison in Kunming Prison, Yunnan province, where he has been denied a Bible.

Pastor John's case has received widespread attention in the US, with many government officials and representatives demanding his release, and US-based Christian rights group the American Center for Law and Justice has filed a submission with the UN Human Rights Council, urging that it take action to ensure

his release.

The pastor has been a US permanent resident since 1990, but has chosen not to become an American citizen because he wants to remain a Chinese citizen so the Chinese government cannot refuse him entry into China. (The Chinese government can deny entry to an American citizen by refusing to issue a visa.)

It is believed that Pastor John's arrest is part of the current crackdown on religion in China, especially on Christians who, like him, have links with the house church movement. His friend of over 25 years, China Aid president Bob Fu, comments: “This reflects the tightening environment under President Xi against any kind of religious independence. In the past when they talked about foreign infiltration, they were referring to the activities of foreign missionaries inside China, but that has now expanded to include Chinese missionaries going overseas.”

China's revised regulations for religious affairs, implemented in February 2018, stipulate that Chinese nationals who leave the country for religious purposes without government authorisation could be fined up to 200,000 yuan (€26,000).

Pastor John married American citizen Jamie Powell, a native of North Carolina, in 1988. They have two adult sons, Ben and Amos, who are also US citizens. The family home is in America, and family members say the pastor's trip to China in 2017 was to be his last before he retired.

The Chinese authorities repeatedly refused to let Pastor John's wife, sons and mother Sun Jinhuan visit him in prison, but his mother and sister were permitted to visit him for the first time on 25 July 2019, the day his appeal was rejected. He comforted them, telling them that the government's decision was as expected.

Goa Zhisheng

Extra Bio Info:

Gao Zhisheng remains forcibly disappeared for his work defending human rights and religious minorities.

On August 13, 2017, Gao, a human rights lawyer, was forcibly disappeared from his home in Jia County, Yulin Municipality, Shaanxi Province. His exact whereabouts and condition are unknown.

Gao has previously served time in prison and been subjected to forced disappearance. He was well known for representing Christians and Falun Gong practitioners and criticizing the state's treatment of them. In August 2006, Gao was forcibly disappeared and then later found guilty of subversion. He was sentenced to three years in prison; however, the sentence was suspended. In December 2011, the Beijing No. 1 Intermediate People's Court ordered Gao to serve that three year sentence after he was accused of allegedly violating the terms of his suspended sentence. Up until his most recent disappearance, authorities had placed Gao under home confinement following his release from prison in August 2014.

Rep. Frank Wolf (R-VA, Ret.) advocated for Gao as part of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project.

(USCIRF)

Wang Yi

Wang Yi is imprisoned for his religious belief and activity.

On December 9, 2018, authorities detained Wang, pastor of the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu and a former human rights attorney, alongside a hundred members of his congregation during a series of police raids on church gatherings. Wang and his congregation were targeted for failing to register their church with authorities and subject it to state regulation.

On December 30, 2019, the Chengdu Intermediate People's Court sentenced Wang to 9 years in prison and 3 years of deprived political rights for "inciting subversion of state power" and "illegal business activity."

There are reports that Wang has been held in solitary confinement and been denied adequate medical care.

Wang is married.

Rep. Vicky Hartzler (R-MO, Ret.) advocated

for Wang as part of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project. (USCIRF)

Qin Defu

Four years prior, Chengdu police raided Early Rain Covenant Church while violently apprehending over 100 congregants. They confiscated church property and shut down the building with its private school and library. Among the believers arrested was Elder Qin Defu and Pastor Wang Yi. This massive, brutal arrest is widely referred to as the "129" crackdown. Not long before these events, Wang Yi published a joint statement of faith; a statement signed by over 400 house church pastors and leaders. The 129 crackdown sent shockwaves across China, affecting every church associated with the joint statement.

Many house church leaders are well known due to their notoriety for speaking out, much like Pastor Wang Yi. Others are known for their previous work or the extreme conditions in which they suffer. While Qin Defu was not a preacher, he helped manage the church internally. He gave up his business to participate in full-time ministry for Early Rain in 2017, previously spending most of his childhood in a Three-Self Church. His involvement was so integral that authorities labeled him as the "backbone" of the church.

ChinaAid sources reported that Qin Defu looked well after his release. He returned home to his two children; his youngest was born just nine months before his arrest. Besides his arrest and his false charge of "illegal business operations," not many details surround Qin and his imprisonment. However, many of his fellow church leaders and other members were glad to see his return during a recent video conference commemorating four years since the massive crackdown.

Pastor Wang Yi is still serving his nine-year sentence for "inciting subversion of state power" and "illegal business operations." The last update was from October 2021, when authorities allowed a visit from his wife. His prison conditions improved overall, even after losing a lot of weight. (China Aid)

Hao Zhiwei

PASTOR HAO ZHIWEI'S VERDICT UPHELD

- DECEMBER 28, 2022

On December 12, Ezhou City Intermediate People's Court issued a final verdict in response to Pastor Hao Zhiwei's appeal. She was sentenced to 8 years on the charge of "fraud" in the first trial. The Court decided to uphold the original verdict. Pastor Hao's case might be the first case in China where a house church pastor was accused of fraud for preaching the gospel.

THE VERDICT

ChinaAid translated the case documents which contain the verdict for Hao Zhiwei's appeal:

The appellant Hao Zhiwei, as well as the defendants Hong Ying and Wan Yuanxiang, fabricated facts and hid truth to defraud and illegally possess others' money. The amount of money involved is huge and has constituted the crime of fraud. Their illegal gains should be recovered. The defendants, Hong Ying and Wan Yuanxiang, played a minor role in the conspiracy, so their penalty should be reduced. Besides, they truthfully confessed their crime, so it is fine to be lenient to them. Since Hao Zhiwei has returned most of the illegal gains, it is fine to be lenient to her. Regarding Hao Zhiwei and her lawyer's appeal, the crime's facts are clear and the evidence is solid and sufficient. Hao is aware that she doesn't have a pastoral certificate. She fabricated her pastoral identity in order to gain victims' trust and collect "offering". She had the intention to purposefully defraud victims. Thus, her appeal and defense are not solid and are not accepted by the Court.

The lawyer pointed out Hao's family returned the illegal gains on behalf of her and requested to be lenient to her. Upon examination, the original judgement was appropriate because it was based on the facts, nature, and details of the crime. Thus, the request is not valid and has been dismissed. The original judgement is clear and the evidence is solid and sufficient. The sentence is appropriate. The legal procedure is valid. Through deliberation and discussion, we

made the following final verdict according to article 236, item 1 of Criminal Procedure Law of the People's Republic of China:

The appeal is dismissed and the original judgment is affirmed.

Pastor Hao Zhiwei's lawyer Mr. Si Weijiang thinks the logic of Ezhou Intermediate People's Court absurd:

"As long as it is not a Three-Self church, the church cannot be called church; the minister cannot be called pastor, and the church cannot accept a tithe or offering. Otherwise, it is committing fraud. This is definitely wrong, because house churches are established and shepherded according the Bible. The worst case is illegal business operation for lacking of license, but definitely it is not fraud. If the government doesn't allow the church to exist, you can ban it. However, the church is not committing fraud. From house church's perspective, many Christians choose not to tell the congregation the church's illegal status. They thought they are in a gray area. But it's time to wake up. Anyone could be targeted by the government at any time, especially the ministers of the church. They need to re-evaluate the price of their belief."

BRIEF HISTORY OF PASTOR HAO AND EGANGQIAO CHURCH

Pastor Hao Zhiwei is 52 years old. She graduated from South Central Seminary in 2001 and Ezhou's Three-Self Church offered her the minister's position due to her excellent preaching. However, she disagreed with the Religious Affairs Bureau's governance of churches, so they rejected her pastoral certificate application in 2007. Ezhou Three-Self Church shut down and converted into a house church, later called Egangqiao Church. Hao Zhiwei pastored the church for 18 years. According to house church tradition, her church invited three pastors to ordain her as a pastor in 2013. She also encouraged her classmates at South Central Seminary to separate from Three-Self Churches.

In early 2018, the local government brought up a request to demolish and relocate the church building, but church members denied the request. Officials issued Pastor Hao a notice and asked her to cooperate with the project. Pastor Hao's husband died of

liver cancer in 2018. Distraught about her husband's passing, She could not respond to the notice in time. On July 31, 2019, she was arrested under the charge of 'fraud.' Her case was transferred to the Protectorate in September.

The prosecution explained that her case hinged on the fact she preached the gospel without approval from the state-sanctioned church. By accepting a tithe, she fell into suspicion of fraud. Her lawyer Si Weijiang said her church is valid. Paying the pastor conforms to house church tradition. It is groundless to indict house church pastors and preachers on fraud charges for believers' voluntary tithe and offering. Lawyer Si Weijiang disclosed police tried to induce church believers to provide evidence against pastor Hao.

Pastor Hao's case might be the first case in China where a house church pastor was accused of fraud for preaching the gospel. After Hao Zhiwei was arrested, many house church pastors were charged with "fraud". For example Elder Zhang Chunlei of Renai Reformed; Elder Hao Ming and Elder Wu Jiannan of Qingcaodi Church; Pastor Wang Xiaoguang and preacher Yang Rongli of Golden Lampstand Church; preacher Li Jie, preacher Han Xiaodong, and co-worker Wang Qiang of Linfen Covenant House Church.

In August 2019, the Egangqiao church building was demolished. Although the 18-year-old edifice was surrounded by barbed wire, some Christians still crossed and held a worship service.

On February 18, 2022, Pastor Hao wrote a letter to her older son Paul. She told him God's peace was with her in the prison. She sleeps well every night. She has two children. Her younger son Moses is a middle schooler. He suffers from severe depression. After Paul heard his mother was sentenced to 8 years, he found it difficult to express his complicated feelings. He has not told his younger brother Moses. He wanted him to stay in school. He said: "Whatever the result, I believe God is using this to temper our hearts."

~Yu Bing, ChinaAid Special Reporter

(China Aid)

Zhang Shaojie

Zhang Shaojie is imprisoned for his religious activity and religious leadership role.

On November 16, 2013, public security officers in Nanle county, Puyang municipality, Henan province, detained Zhang, a pastor of the Nanle Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) Church, following a series of land disputes with local authorities.

On November 23, 2013, Zhang was formally charged with "obstruction of official business" and "gathering a crowd to disrupt social order," a reference to his congregation. The former charge was later changed to "fraud."

On July 4, 2014, the Nanle County People's Court sentenced Zhang to 12 years in prison. There are reports that Zhang's trial was filled with procedural violations, including attempts to deny him access to counsel.

On August 21, 2014, the Puyang Municipal Intermediate People's Court rejected Zhang's appeal.

In November 2019, Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ) raised Zhang's case in a letter to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. In the letter, the congressmen mentioned reports that Zhang was being mistreated in prison, including being deprived of sleep and food.

In December 2019, it was reported that Zhang was experiencing mental health issues after being put on a new high blood pressure medication.

Rep. Vicky Hartzler (R-MO, Ret.) advocated for Zhang as part of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project.

(USCIRF)

Li Juncai

02/18/2022 Washington, D.C. — A pastor, who was once part of the state-sanctioned Three-Self Church in China's Henan province, refused to accept the imposed demands on his church as Beijing intensified crackdown against Christianity. For this, he was sentenced to five years and a hefty fine of

210,000 RMB (\$32,487 USD) with several trumped-up charges.

Pastor Li Juncai from Zhongxin Church in Xinxiang County, Henan province, was first detained by local authorities on Feb. 20, 2019, along with three other Christians from his church: Wu Raoyun, Bai Yun, and Ma Yanfang, after being accused of disrupting public service.

Pastor Li's church was once part of the Three-Self church, though it withdrew its affiliation in 2013. When the government began removing crosses across the province, Pastor Li repeatedly refused to allow the officials to destroy his church's cross. He also stood against the proposal to install a flag-raising platform while replacing the sign "Love God Love People" with "Love [Your] Country Love [Your] Religion" at his church.

A day after their arrest, the cross at his church was removed, the "Love God Love People" sign was wiped out, and the national flag was flying high at his church. Pastor Li and his coworkers were charged with "disrupting public service," yet only he remains incarcerated. Two more charges of embezzlement and destruction of accounting records were later added to Li's case.

Someone who is familiar with the case stated that the evidence for these three cases is lacking, yet the authorities want to slap him with these accusations. His son believes Pastor Li was targeted by the government in retaliation for him taking a stance against the forced demolition of the cross and the suppression of house churches as Beijing tightens its control over religion.

During his detention, Pastor Li successfully spread the gospel within the cell — so far, three people have accepted Christ, including a Muslim.

Pastor Juncai Li's church has approximately 70 chapels across the county. His church broke away from the local Three-Self Patriotic Church in 2013 and became an independent church. Pastor Li graduated from Henan Theological Seminary and was ordained in Hong Kong. His family members also serve at the same church.

Henan province is estimated to have a

Christian population of several million. According to The Amity Foundation, Henan takes up nearly one-fourth of the Christian population in the country. Some overseas commentators call it the "Galilee of China." Beginning in 2018, the authorities in the province began to clamp down on churches, hoping to significantly reduce the number of churches and Christians.

"All the accusations against Li are fabricated charges; all the charges are revenge and crackdown [against him]," said Pastor Li Juncai's family.

(ICC)

Lian Xu Liang

(Xi'an, Shaanxi Province - January 23, 2023)
Authorities arrested two Xi'an Church of Abundance pastors for "fraud"—Lian Xuliang and his father Lian Changnian. Without any update in five months, Pastor Lian Xuliang's wife published an open letter on Chinese social media defending her husband and father-in-law.

THE WORK OF XI'AN CHURCH OF ABUNDANCE

In her letter, she said members of their church committed no crimes. Nobody in their congregation ever divorced. According to her, God transformed the hearts of the congregation:

Who doesn't want to see a marriage turning from the verge of collapsing into a good relationship? My husband and my father-in-law are both faithful people. I don't understand why they were charged with fraud and endangering national security.

ARREST AND RSDL

Pastor Lian Changnian was born in 1954, almost 70 years old. His son Lian Xuliang became an ordained pastor not long ago. On the afternoon of August 17, 2022, police officers suddenly searched their homes and took 5 people to the police station for interrogation, including Lian Xuliang's 8-year-old son. Police also took away Preacher Fu Juan.

The next day, both families received a notice of Residential Surveillance at a Designated Location (RSDL). According to the statement, all three leaders were charged on suspicion of fraud.

FAMILIES OF IMPRISONED PASTORS

Lian Xuliang's wife wrote: "Growing up in a pastor's family, it's normal for my husband to become a pastor. However, the abnormal part was that my husband knew his dad was once imprisoned in the detention center. He became a pastor knowing that he may be imprisoned someday. We rarely see parents hope their children go to prison. Those who have ever been imprisoned usually try their best to hide the history of imprisonment, especially from their children. Everyone wants their children to live a smooth life and not to repeat their nightmare."

PASTOR LIAN'S CHARACTER

According to the post, Lian Xuliang rejected a donation of 1,500 (~\$222) from a fellow church member. He told them that Xi'an Church of Abundance already provided for his family, about 4,000 a month (~\$590). "I don't understand why such a person was charged with fraud," she wrote. Furthermore, during their 14 years of marriage, no one has ever called or asked for their money. Nor did she ever hear someone call the police to report a case.

POST REMOVED

Pastor Lian's wife also tagged many public accounts and pages, hoping to draw legal and media attention. However, the Chinese social media platform Weibo removed her post almost immediately.

(China Aid)

ERITREA:

Meron Gebreselasie

Eritrean pastor and anaesthetist Meron Gebreselasie was arrested in 2004 and has remained in prison ever since. He was a leader in a banned church network.

LATEST NEWS (MARCH 2020): News has emerged from the prison where Meron is being held that his health is stable.

Meron Gebreselasie (also known as Million) was pastor of Massawa Rhema Evangelical Church and worked as an anaesthetist at Massawa Hospital. The port city of Massawa is on the Red Sea coast, about 110 km east of the capital, Asmara.

Pastor Meron, who is not married, was arrested on 3 June 2004, shortly after Pastor Tesfatsion Hagos of Asmara Rhema Evangelical Church visited his church and home. Their churches have been illegal since a crackdown on Christians in Eritrea in May 2002, when the government banned all religious groups except the Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches and Sunni Islam.

Pastor Tesfatsion was arrested on 27 May 2004, during his visit to Massawa. He was released in 2010, gravely ill, but recovered and left Eritrea.

Pastor Meron was arrested at a police checkpoint just before entering Asmara, on his way to return Pastor Tesfatsion's belongings to his home. He was taken to Asmara's 2nd Police Station, where he was held for two months before being moved into its notorious maximum-security Wengel Mermera Central Criminal Investigation interrogation centre. It is believed that many of Eritrea's prominent political and military prisoners are incarcerated in this dungeon-like inner labyrinth of cells, as well as 21 church leaders including Mussie Ezaz, Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel, Rev Haile Naizghe and Pastor Kidane Weldou. They, like Pastor Meron, have never been tried, and have been held incommunicado since their arrests.

Family

Meron is not married, and his parents have died. He has a sister who lives in Canada.

(Human Rights Without Frontiers, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, In Chains for Christ, Release Eritrea)

Mussia Ezas

Mussie Ezaz was arrested in September 2007 when Eritrean authorities came after him for his work as a youth minister with the Kale Hiwot (Word of Life) Church. He worked as an evangelist for 14 years and served with

Youth for Christ for a number of years before developing a ministry to youth at the Kale Hiwot Church, and other believers described him as a kind, generous and gifted leader.

Mussie was taken to a small village prison staffed by young soldiers. He managed to escape and tried to flee the country with the aid of fellow Christians. He called his family to let say good bye, and then he headed for the border. When he reached the border town of Adi Kaih, about 60 miles away, he called his family to let them know he made it. Shortly afterward, authorities caught up with him and he was rearrested.

After his arrested, authorities arrested a number of other Christians, including Pastor Oqbamichel Haimanot (also on prisionalert.com), because Mussie called him while fleeing.

For a long time after his arrest, his family had no idea where he was and had no information about his health. Eritrean believers feared he'd been killed or left alone in a remote prison cell somewhere in the desert.

Recent reports indicate Mussie is located at the maximum-security crime investigation unit (Wenjel Mermera) in the capital city of Asmara. Many other pastors and church leaders are and were imprisoned there, some for more than 10 years. As with other Christians imprisoned in Eritrea, Mussie has never been tried or charged. His family has no idea whether he will ever be released.

Mussie is married and has three children waiting for him to come home. (VOM)

Haile Nayzgi

After Haile Nayzgi's wife was warned she might also be arrested, she and the children decided to flee. After an arduous journey, they reached another country, where they have been safely living for the past several years. VOM has been supporting them and visiting regularly. Some months ago, in a message from Haile smuggled out of Eritrea, he thanked VOM for our support of his family. It was encouraging for him to know

(VOM)

INDIA:

Pastor Sawan

Pastor Sawan, who leads a church in Western India, together with an elder in the same church was taken in custody and questioned at length.

After some time, when the two men were not released, other members of the church, including Pastor Sawan's wife and son, went to the police station to inquire about case. They too were detained for a month.

Six of the church members were later released but Pastor Sawan remained in custody. This was because one of the thugs who instigated the police to arrest Pastor Sawan had falsely claimed that the pastor tried to convert him and threatened his life.

When Pastor Sawan became sick during his imprisonment, he was transferred to a government hospital for treatment for a week but he had to be chained to his bed.

Pray that Pastor Sawan will be released and reunited with his family. Pray that justice will prevail and the false charges against him will be dropped for lack of evidence. Pray that God will supply the finances needed for Pastor Sawan's family to pay for the legal fees for this case.

(Goshen)

IRAN:

Joseph Shahbazian

Good news from Iran: Joseph Shahbazian, an Armenian Christian who was sentenced to 10 years in Evin Prison for belonging to a house church, has had his sentence reduced to two years.

Shahbazian was imprisoned on 28 May 2022 in the notorious Evin Prison. The initial accusations against him included acting against state security through his involvement in the home church of evangelical Christianity, inciting the population, and insulting holy things.

You may remember his story, alongside Mina Khajavi's and Malihe Nazari's, which we reported last June. They were among at

least 38 Christians arrested in a coordinated operation by intelligence agents in the summer of 2020. Malihe Nazari was released earlier this year to be with her son, who has leukaemia – it is believed that the Supreme Court granted her release due to her son’s condition. Mina Khajavi’s sentence currently remains unchanged.

Acquitted of all charges – but not released

While the Supreme Court announced in February 2023 that there was no evidence presented to substantiate the accusations levelled against him, and deemed the maximum punishment of ten years unjustifiable, his acquittal has led to a reduction of his sentence rather than freedom.

“The Supreme Court have failed to uphold Shahbazian’s rights as a citizen to worship peacefully.” MANSOUR BORJI, ARTICLE 18

“It is great that both the supreme and appeal court have acknowledged the unmerited and cruel maximum punishment that was handed down to Mr Shahbazian,” says Mansour Borji, advocacy director for Article 18. “However, it is disappointing that they have failed to recognise and uphold his rights as a citizen to worship peacefully and freely without the fear of prosecution. Joseph has not done anything illegal to deserve two years in prison.

“Praying or taking part in a Bible study with other Christians is every citizen’s right, according to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which emphasises that ‘everyone has the right to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance either alone or in community with others and in public or private.’”

Having already served nine months of his prison term, Shahbazian has 15 months remaining until the completion of his two-year sentence. Additionally, he has been prohibited from being a member of social and political groups for two years, and once his sentence concludes, he is to be placed in internal exile in Kahnuj city. Furthermore, he

is restricted from travelling abroad for two years, though a two-year post-imprisonment exile in a remote province of south east Iran has been dismissed.

A concerning pattern

The case of Joseph Shahbazian highlights a concerning pattern within the judicial system of the Islamic Republic, where Christian citizens have faced severe punishments, including long-term imprisonment and exile. Despite the defendants’ defences and requests for reconsideration, the courts have often upheld their initial judgments without giving due consideration. An earlier appeal made by Shahbazian had been rejected, before the partial success of this appeal.

It is notable that Christian citizens have received disproportionately harsh sentences. Their alleged crimes primarily involve participating in home churches and possessing Christian literature in their homes.

The reduction in Joseph Shahbazian’s sentence is a small glimmer of hope, but it underscores the need for greater attention to the fair treatment of religious minorities in Iran. Praise God for this reduction in Joseph’s sentence, and pray that he will be freed sooner. Please keep praying for Joseph, his family and all Christians facing persecution in Iran for belonging to a church group.

PLEASE PRAY

- Give thanks for this sentence reduction, and pray that Joseph will be freed
- For Iran’s constitutional freedom of religion or belief to be a reality in the lives of Christians and other religious minorities
- For all Christians in Iranian prisons to know God’s loving comfort and closeness.

(Open Doors UK)

KAZAKHSTAN:

Pastor Maximov

Three self-exiled pastors have been

sentenced to terms up to five years for leading the New Life Pentecostal Church in the city of Almaty. The sentences were announced on November 1st, when the court rejected their latest appeal. The founding pastor, Maxim Maximov, faces five years in prison, while his wife Larisa Maximova, and ministry colleague Sergei Zaikin, each face four years. All three pastors intend to appeal the conviction at the Supreme Court.

The charges involve “causing psychological harm,” as well as alleged involvement in illegal associations. In at least one case, however, the time frame for the accusation was before the victim was even born. The three pastors have fled the country and are presently living in the United States, though they would like to return to their homeland.

The New Life Church was originally founded in 1991 under the former Soviet Union and officially registered in 2012. Despite its legal status, the church has faced repeated attacks by the state-controlled media over the past few years. Though all charges were against the three individuals, five properties belonging to their church -- including the main worship building -- have been confiscated and placed under a restraining order.

Some governing authorities have offered alternatives to resolve the issues. In November 2018, another church leader, Pastor Ivan Kryukov, was approached by police who suggested that all these legal problems could be dismissed if the church gave monetary compensation. A few months later, the church leaders were told that their collaboration with the secret police would settle any issues. Offers like these have been declined by the pastoral team due to the injustice of their situation. For more information on the challenges facing Christians in Kazakhstan, visit our country report.

Please intercede for these three exiled church leaders, as they spend extended time away from their homes and church, only to be threatened with imprisonment if they return. May their congregation members find ways of meeting together for worship and

encouragement. In the meantime, pray that the courts will provide a just and equitable ruling. (Forum 18, Nov 2019)

NORTH KOREA:

Zhang Wen Shi

Country/Area of Origin: Zhang is ethnically Korean but is a Chinese citizen. Zhang is currently imprisoned in North Korea

Reason for Arrest:

Prior to his detention, Deacon Zhang resided in Changbai China, a town located on the border between China and North Korea. Alongside another notable Korea-Chinese pastor, Han Chung-Ryeol, Deacon Zhang would host North Korean businessmen when they crossed into China to purchase items, conduct business, or seek medical care. Deacon Zhang, in addition to caring for these North Korean citizens by providing clothing and necessities, would share the gospel to those who were willing to receive it.

Deacon Zhang became a well-known figure and some North Korean citizens would regularly return to visit him and participate in more Bible lessons; many became Christians themselves.

In November 2014, North Korean authorities kidnapped Deacon Zhang, transported him into North Korea, and sentenced him to fifteen years in prison despite that he is a Chinese citizen. Deacon Zhang's partner, Pastor Han, was fatally stabbed by North Korean authorities in Changbai a year and a half later.

Latest Updates:

- On 2 June 2020, it was announced that USCIRF Commissioner James Carr adopted Deacon Zhang through USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project, and made the following remarks:

- “Deacon Zhang committed no crime and took no action against North Korea and yet he now languishes in a prison camp because the regime is terrified of religion. Sadly, Deacon Zhang is far from unique. He

is one of the thousands of Christians and other religious believers held in political prison camps. In the U.S. government's continued negotiations with the North Korean government, we must not forget about victims like Deacon Zhang." – USCIRF Commissioner James Carr

- Voice of Martyrs (VOM) Korea representative, Dr. Hyun Sook Foley, released the following statement: "Deacon Jang, who is also known by his Chinese name Zhang Wen Shi, is an ethnically Korean Chinese citizen who was kidnapped in November 2014 from China and put in a North Korean prison. We believe the reason for his kidnapping was to gather information about the North Korean ministry work we are doing with Pastor Han. [Zhang] is a simple man who never did anything political. He just helped North Korean people for many years. That should never be a crime, and Christians should join together to help Deacon Jang and his family." – Dr. Hyun Sook Foley, VOM

PAKISTAN:

Zafar Bhatti

Pakistani pastor Zafar Bhatti (57) has been in Rawalpindi's Adiala Central Jail since July 2012, when he was charged with sending blasphemous text messages. On 3 May 2017, Zafar was sentenced to life imprisonment for blasphemy, a charge he denies. The mobile phone in question was not registered to his name. Zafar's appeal hearings have been adjourned repeatedly, but rather than being acquitted he was sentenced to death on 3 January 2022.

LATEST NEWS (March 2023): On 8 March Lawyer Saiful Malook told the operations manager of British Asian Christian Association that he had received a call from the High Court Bench Rawalpindi cancelling Zafar's hearing, which was scheduled for the following day, without any reason. He said in a video message, "It's outrageous that an innocent person has been detained in jail for twelve years, while his appeals are being ignored... I travelled to Rawalpindi to see the court registrar who told me that... this appeal

was filed in 2022 and [currently] appeals filed in 2021 were being opened. It seems he has taken the file to a senior judge; following usual process but the judge then refused it." Mr Malook added, "The issue according to my experience is that no judge wants to hear blasphemy appeals."

Before his arrest, Zafar worked selling medicines and often went door-to-door with his presentation, also reading the Bible and praying with families in homes he visited. He founded and led a small NGO called "Jesus World Mission" to assist the poor.

In July 2012, a local Islamic leader filed a complaint at New Town police station, Rawalpindi, saying he had been sent messages from an unregistered number insulting the Prophet Mohammed's mother. He threatened that his organisation would take matters into its own hands if an investigation for blasphemy were not opened under Section 295-C of the Penal Code – even though insulting the Prophet's mother falls under Section 295-A. (Section 295-C carries the death penalty; Section 295-A does not.)

A First Incident Report was lodged against an unknown person, but the police later arrested Zafar, charging him under section 295-C. They tortured him to extract a confession, but he insisted on his innocence.

Several reports proved that the SIM was not registered to Zafar but was registered to the holder of a different Computerised National Identity Card (CNIC), his colleague Ghazala Khan. In November 2012, she was arrested and charged with blasphemy. At her trial in April 2013, Justice Khalid Mehmood of the Lahore High Court refused to pass judgement against her and instead tried to convince the petitioner Ahmed Khan to forgive her. Ghazala Khan said she was innocent and did not want forgiveness but to be freed on merit. The judge showed her leniency as she was a woman, and granted bail. She died in November 2016 from Hepatitis C, aged 39.

In May 2017, Additional District and Session Judge Mohammad Yar Gondal sentenced Zafar to life in prison. Section 295-C mandates the death sentence, but because there was no evidence against him, he was

sentenced to life imprisonment instead. Zafar's appeal hearings were adjourned repeatedly, but in October 2021 Lahore High Court referred the case back to the lower court, and in January 2022 Zafar was sentenced to death.

In prison, Zafar has experienced pressure from Muslim prisoners to convert to Islam, and has been beaten several times. On 31 March 2013, his food was poisoned, which caused bleeding from the nose and mouth and left him in a critical condition for days. He is kept in high security and is not allowed out of his cell. For security reasons, court proceedings have been carried out by the judge in the cell.

Zafar has developed diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, headaches and problems with his eyesight since being imprisoned. He is also suffering from depression and feels great sadness over the years he has lost.

Reported dead in 2014

On 25 September 2014, mistaken rumours circulated that Bhatti had been killed in his prison cell. It was not Bhatti who been attacked, but the prisoner in the adjacent cell, British Muslim Muhammad Asghar (71), who had been sentenced to death for blasphemy. Ashgar, who was arrested in 2010, had a history of mental illness.

Police officer Muhammad Yousaf, who had been deployed to protect Muhammad Asghar, shot him in the chest. The bullet broke two of his ribs and punctured his right lung, but he recovered in hospital. Prison guards arrested Yousaf, who had planned to kill all prison inmates accused of blasphemy.

Zafar and his wife Nawab (72) do not have any children. Nawab's health is deteriorating and in March 2023 she moved from Islamabad to Lahore, where accommodation was arranged for her in the majority-Christian Youhanabad area. This means she can no longer visit Zafar every Thursday with food and medicine, as she used to do, and can only visit him once a month. In April 2023 Nawab told a team from Lahore Evangelical Ministries that since Zafar's second second heart attack in prison he has been "more in depression and disappointed".

At one point Nawab worked as a cleaner in three homes owned by a man who reportedly treated her "like an animal" until she developed double pneumonia early in 2019 and had to be hospitalised. While she eventually recovered from pneumonia, her general health is now very poor and she needs much support.

In May 2017, Nawab told the BACA that she was very worried because of numerous attempts to kill her husband. She reported that he was bullied every day and was not safe from inmates or prison staff. She said, "When we meet we cry together and pray seeking God's intervention," and added, "Many Muslim people hated how quickly his church was growing. They have taken this action to undermine his work." Zafar's sister Naureen has also spoken of the risk of attack in prison and said, "My brother has spoken several times of threats received in the cell."

VIETNAM:

Nguyen Nang Tinh

November 2021:

The UN WGAD issued an opinion on the arrest and detention of Nguyen Nang Tinh, which it considered a violation of international norms. "The present case is one of many cases brought before the Working Group in recent years concerning arbitrary detention in Viet Nam. These cases follow a familiar pattern [that] indicates a systemic problem with arbitrary detention in Viet Nam which, if it continues, may amount to a serious violation of international law."

Details - Background, History of Activism, Family Situation.

Arrested May 29, 2019. Sentenced to 11 years in prison under Art. 117 (2015 Code). Expected Release is May 29, 2030.

Nguyen Trung Ton

Nguyen Trung Ton's wife, Lanh, attempted to visit her husband in March this year. It is a long distance to the prison. She

travelled with the wife of another prisoner. Unfortunately the women were not allowed to see their husbands. The last time Lanh heard from Ton was in February 2022, when she received a poem from him, as well as new year greetings to his family and friends. There is no update on Nguyen Trung Ton's health. He is due for release in 2029.

KIDNAPPED VICTIMS:

Raymond Koh

Eyewitnesses said it was like a scene from a movie. On Feb. 13, 2017, three black SUVs surrounded Pastor Raymond Koh's silver sedan and forced it to the side of the road. Men dressed in black got out of their vehicles, grabbed Pastor Koh and shoved him into one of the SUVs while men on motorbikes stopped any approaching cars. The SUVs and Pastor Koh were gone in 40 seconds, and no one has heard from him since.

Susanna is convinced that her husband's abduction is tied to a 2011 confrontation with officers from the Selangor Islamic Department. As she and her husband hosted a dinner one night for sponsors of a charity they had started in 2004, 30 officers raided the event on the assumption that they were evangelizing Muslims, an illegal act in Malaysia. While some Muslims were among those attending the dinner, its sole purpose was to thank sponsors of their Harapan Komuniti (Hope Community) charity, which helped the poor, single mothers, children, drug addicts and those diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. About 120 people from various backgrounds attended the event in a local church.

During the raid, the officers took photographs and videos of those in attendance, and that was just the beginning of the intimidation. "After that incident, my husband and I received a death threat," Susanna said. They received mail with white powder believed to be anthrax. Pastor Koh also received a box containing two bullets and a letter threatening to kill him and his wife.

Still, Pastor Koh was undeterred. "He continued, though there was some fear and anxiety," Susanna said. "He felt that the Lord called him to fulfill the Great Commission, and that means to every tribe, nation and tongue. He does not discriminate, so we just carried on our work with the poor, the needy, the marginalized, and with God's grace we carried through."

After those initial threats, they continued their work with no further problems until the pastor's abduction in 2017. "It was a big shock to myself and my family and Christian community, as well as to the whole country," Susanna said of the abduction.

When Susanna went to the police station to file a report on her missing husband, they interrogated her about her husband's activities, specifically whether he proselytized Muslims. "It was strange that he wasn't asking me the normal questions you would ask the family of the victim of abduction," she said. Finally, at 3 a.m., Susanna lost her patience with the interrogators. "I am not answering any more questions," she told them. "I have my rights and I am going out there to look for my husband. The important thing for you to do is to go out there and look for my husband."

Susanna believes the Lord had been preparing her husband for the abduction. Pastor Koh had begun taking three-hour prayer walks early in the morning, and he had been memorizing large portions of Scripture. "He would tell me, 'I have just finished memorizing 1 Corinthians 15,'" she recalled. "I was thinking that he is really a great example to follow." He was also physically prepared, as he was in good health and had been playing soccer with teenagers in a league he had started.

Despite these reassurances and the knowledge that Raymond is in God's hands, Susanna has struggled with her husband's absence. "The hardest part is not knowing where he is, what happened to him and how he is doing right now," she said. "Right now my children are going for counseling because this has taken a toll on them physically as well as ... emotionally and psychologically. But we thank God for the Christian

community and also the worldwide church that has been an encouragement to us; they have expressed their support through prayers and sending postcards to us. That really lifts up our spirits and encourages us in many ways.”

She is also thankful for the way God has ministered to her during her trials. “God has been very real and personal to us,” she said. “I remember the first three weeks I was very lost and even had panic attacks. We decided to go for a silent retreat and that really helped me to ... fix my eyes on Jesus. During that time, God spoke to me through His Word.” One verse that is close to Susanna’s heart is Psalm 46:10, which says, “Be still, and know that I am God.”

“I don’t need to struggle and strive,” she continued. “I can just rest in the assurance that He is with me and He will never leave me or forsake me. He will work all things for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.”

As Susanna prays for the release of her husband, she also prays for their whole family, that God “will create a new person in us that will be strong and patient, godly, all these qualities through all these trials.” She also asks for prayer that churches in Malaysia will be strong amid subtle persecution and that they will “speak out for truth and justice and also that they would love people into the kingdom in this.”

Susanna wonders and worries about her husband from day to day, but she has forgiven those responsible for his abduction. “From the beginning, I have decided to forgive them because they know not what they do, and I follow the examples of our Lord Jesus Christ,” she said. “God really had to deal with me first to forgive them, pray for them, because they need to know the Lord. If there is going to be transformation in Malaysia, there needs to be transformation in the lives of individuals.”

Gilbart Biswas

from PIME Asia News (1/13/2016):

Christian clergyman arrested as a “threat” to the Bishwa Ijtema Islamic pilgrimage

Police took into custody Rev Gilbert

Biswas in Tongi, where one of the largest Muslim gatherings is held each year, for his “suspicious behaviour,” namely preaching the Gospel and selling booklets. Two million pilgrims from 150 countries attended this year’s event.

Dhaka (AsiaNews) – Bangladeshi police detained Rev Gilbert Biswas for preaching the Gospel and selling religious booklets during Bishwa Ijtema, the second largest Islamic pilgrimage in the world after the Hajj, which is held every year in Tongi (near Dhaka), on the banks of the Turag River.

The clergyman was taken into custody last Saturday. Deployed to provide security to the event, police justified his arrest on “security grounds” because of his “suspicious behaviour”. One officer said that “no one can proclaim the Gospel on other religious sites.”

In reality, the Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees every citizen the right to profess, practice and propagate their faith.

“We are very concerned about the arrest of Rev Gilbert Biswas,” said a fellow clergyman, anonymous for security reasons. “He did not commit any crime and was arrested illegally by the police, which has not yet released him.”

Now the “judge wants to read the booklet Rev Gilbert Biswas distributed,” he added. “After reading it, he will give his verdict.”

The Bishwa Ijtema (Global congregation or World Meeting in Bangla) is an annual event organised by the Tabligi Jamaat (Society for the spread of the faith), a transnational religious and non-political movement that seeks the spiritual reform of Islam.

The event, which includes moments of prayer and preaching, draws millions of people from all over the world. This year some two million people from 150 nations took part in the event. The government deployed more than 5,000 police agents to ensure security.

Leah Sharibu

12 May 2023 (Open Doors UK)

Leah Sharibu turns 20 but remains in captivity – all because she bravely raised her

hand to say she's a Christian This month, Leah Sharibu from Nigeria turns 20. Her teenage years were spent mostly in captivity after bravely refusing to renounce Jesus. We caught up with her mother, Rebecca, to find out how she and husband are doing as they hold onto the hope that they'll one day be reunited with their daughter.

"My request morning and night is that you keep praying for Leah, as you have been doing in the past," asks her mother, Rebecca

Shortly after being kidnapped by Islamic militants from their school in February 2018, more than 100 girls were gathered by their captors and asked, "Who is a Christian?"

One girl courageously put up her hand. Her name is Leah Sharibu.

"We rebuked her and said that we are all Muslims," reported the girls afterwards. "But she refused. She raised her hand and said she is a Christian. They [the militant group Islamic State West African Province, or ISWAP] said, since she is a Christian, she must denounce Christ and accept Islam before she could enter the van. She refused and said she is a Christian and she would not accept Islam."

It was an extraordinarily brave thing to do, because whilst all other girls were released a month after being taken, Leah remained held - as she has ever since.

The girls return - but not Leah

When she was first taken from the Government Girls Science Technical College in the town of Dapchi in northern Nigeria's Yobe State, Leah was 14 years old. Her birthday is 14 May and this year she turns 20. She becomes an adult having had most of her teenage years cruelly robbed from her.

"She refused and said she is a Christian and she would not accept Islam" LEAH SHARIBU

For Leah's mother and father, Rebecca and Nathan, the heartache continues each day. Leah's story is no longer in the headlines, though many Open Doors supporters are faithfully praying for Leah and her family. Earlier this year, Open Doors local partners visited Rebecca and Nathan in Dapchi to encourage them and pray with the family, and to let them know that Open Doors supporters

worldwide continue to pray for them.

For Rebecca, the moment she heard that her daughter was not among those released is etched into her memory. "When all the parents ran to the school to see their daughters, I was told Leah is not among them. Leah was not returned. I asked the girls that came back, 'How come Leah is not back?'"

Courageous but costly faith

It was then that Rebecca and Nathan were told of their daughter's courageous faith - and what it had cost her.

"Since you will not accept Islam, you will be left here [as a prisoner]," the militants said to Leah, to which she defiantly replied: "I will not accept Islam because I am not a Muslim. I will remain here." The girls told Rebecca that, after her declaration of faith, Leah was crying. "We were all crying as they put us in the van and left," said one of Leah's classmates.

Two months later, ISWAP released a video in which Leah begged for the government's help and asked the public to 'help my mother, father, my younger brother and relatives'. Two weeks later, the militant group warned that they would kill Leah, 15 at the time, if their demands were not met. After the deadline, ISWAP released another video saying that Leah would be their 'slave for life'.

While there are frequent rumours about Leah's whereabouts, and reports that Leah has been married off to one of the commanders and given birth to two children, her parents have yet to see or hear from her daughter.

"Only the video released some days after their abduction, that was the first and last time I saw her face and heard her voice," says Rebecca.

- Stand up to violent persecution in Nigeria and across sub-Saharan Africa

Unwavering faith and steadfast hope

Rebecca is so proud of 'her Leah', even while knowing that her daughter would be with her now if she had renounced her faith. "I am thankful to Leah for the decision she took," she continues. "She refused to become a

Muslim. Her strong faith makes me feel very happy.”

It’s a joy that sits alongside grief and agonising uncertainty. “Honestly, we are not happy,” admits Rebecca. “We are just managing our lives here.” But they don’t live in despair, helped by their unwavering faith. “God has been our source of strength in everything we are doing. Looking at my walk with God, I can say this is the time I became closer to Him.”

Like many persecuted believers navigating the absence of a family member, Rebecca turns to her community and the Bible for support: “Joining the women’s fellowship church, I have been really encouraged and strengthened,” she shares. “Staying alone at home will not strengthen or encourage me... Anytime I am worried, I read and recite Psalm 23.”

“Looking at my walk with God, I can say this is the time I became closer to Him”
REBECCA SHARIBU

Such faith not only gives Rebecca and her husband strength for each day but hope for tomorrow. “We are praying for Leah; nothing is too big for God to do. I know one day she will come back,” she says.

“Keep praying for Leah”

Leah’s mother also has a message for her global family who continue to uphold her family in prayer. “I want to say a big thank you to Open Doors who have been praying with us, may God bless you all. Our thanksgiving is the only thing I can give. I lack how best to say thank you,” she says. “My request morning and night is that you keep praying for Leah, as you have been doing in the past. I know that one day God will answer and rescue my daughter.”

Thank you also to the hundreds of you who have written a message of encouragement to Rebecca and Nathan. These have now been sent to the couple and they will be a tremendous source of encouragement to them.

Sarah Atef

ICC: 07/06/2019 Egypt (International Christian Concern) – A Coptic Christian named Sarah Atef who was a fourth year university student disappeared on June 27th and remains missing. She is from Minya but is believed to have been kidnapped by a taxi driver while waiting in front of her university in Beni Suef.

She was planning to return home and had just finished her final college exam. Her school teacher told ICC that “This is a very pretty girl and well educated. The day before the kidnapping, she called her mother on the cell phone and told her that she would come back to Minya after the exam ended.”

Her family realized something was wrong when she didn’t return and both her cell phone and Facebook account were deactivated. Her father filed a police report on June 29th but no new information on her whereabouts has been discovered. Sarah did reportedly make a phone call to her family saying that she fell in love with a Muslim man and ran away with him. However, those close to the family say that Sarah is a very devout Christian and did not affirm Islam during the phone conversation.

“This is a trap for Christian girls,” said one of her teachers. “This girl is very religious and believes in Jesus. It is hard (for her) to convert to Islam.”

“When her mother knew that her daughter was kidnapped, she got out to the balcony and screamed to loudly. She was hitting her face. All of the neighbors got out of their houses to monitor,” said a family neighbor.

Islamic extremists use kidnappings to intimidate and control the Christian population in rural Egypt. Kidnapped girls are forced to convert and then marry a Muslim man. In some cases, the police have been known to facilitate the kidnapping. A local priest is working closely with the police in this matter in the hopes to speed her return back to her family.

Joshua Hilmya & Ruth Sitepu

Open Doors (April 2022):

‘Enforced disappearance’ ruled out in case of missing Malay pastors The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia have ruled out enforced disappearance in the case of missing Malay pastor Joshua Hilmy and his wife Ruth, who is from Indonesia. The couple went missing around the same time as Pastor Raymond, but unlike his case, there has been no police effort made to find them. Please continue to pray for Joshua and Ruth’s family.

The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) have ruled out enforced disappearance in the case of missing Malay pastor Joshua Hilmy and his wife Ruth, as they have not found any evidence to suggest it in their investigation.

Joshua and Ruth went missing on the 30 November 2016, just three months before Pastor Raymond Koh. Many believe that Joshua and Ruth’s disappearance is related to Pastor Raymond’s as the facts of the cases are very similar.

Since the human rights enquiry into their disappearance began in 2016, nothing has been done to locate the pastor and his wife. While enforced disappearance has been ruled out, the judge did highlight that the police were very slow in investigating this particular case.

For example, the investigating officer only lodged the report a month after it was initially brought to the attention of the police by Josiah Peter, a friend of Joshua and Ruth. Joshua also received threats from radical groups on social media, but nothing has been done to trace the source of these threats.

The panel also found that the police were trying to suppress this case from the Indonesian embassy. According to Ruth’s brother, the investigating officer failed to notify the embassy of Ruth’s disappearance when it was filed in 2016, and even now, Ruth’s family have not been notified of any new information.

Please pray:

- For Ruth and Joshua’s families as they struggle with grief and a lack of cooperation

from the authorities, that they will receive justice and closure

- For God’s wisdom to guide them on their next step
- That God will move the hearts of the authorities to properly and thoroughly investigate these disappearances.

Hurmuz Diril

(From Sat 7)

(in Turkey) Hurmüz, 72, and Şimuni Diril, 65, living in the Syriac village Mehre (Kovankaya) in the Beytüşşebap district of Şırnak, disappeared on January 11 last year. After 70 days, Şimuni Diril from the Chaldean couple, was found dead by his children on March 20, 2020, approximately 800 meters away from the village. The fate of Hurmüz Diril, 72, is still unknown.

No news has been received for 405 days from Hurmüz Diril, who lived in the Syriac village Mehre (Kovankaya) in Şırnak’s Beytüşşebap and disappeared with his wife Şimuni Diril on January 11, 2020. 70 days after the disappearance of Şimuni Diril from the Chaldean couple, his dead body was found by his son Kemal Diril, 800 meters away from their home, by the stream.