

Market Drayton Churches Together: Prayer for Persecuted Christians - 14 June 2018

Colombia

29 June - Open Doors UK: From guns to guitars

opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/colombia-180629

Children in Colombia are not guaranteed a normal, carefree childhood. In many cases, children are enlisted into the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), where they face violence and psychological and physical torture. But, thanks to your ongoing prayers and support, children like Abraham* do not have to face such a future.

As a child growing up in Colombia, Abraham dreamed of studying, working and helping his family. It was a dream impossible to realise in a region where children from a very young age are forced to carry guns and kill. Fortunately for Abraham, with God, nothing is impossible. And what was just a dream back then is now becoming reality, thanks to the support he has received from the Open Doors Children's Centre.

At first sight Abraham seems to be a serious and distant young man. His big, strong hands reflect the hard work of the field, where he works part-time. However, a brief conversation is enough for the friendly character and broad smile of this 18-year-old to break through. A smile that was almost lost, as thousands of young Colombian lives have been lost, in a war that, to date, has claimed more than eight million victims.

'My Future was to Hold a Gun'

Abraham arrived at the Open Doors Children's Centre in Colombia back in 2010. He was a fearful child fleeing war and the threat of forced recruitment into the guerrilla movement. His family suffered religious persecution from indigenous leaders, who criminalise Christianity with punishment, expulsion, dispossession of property and forced labour. Even today, being an indigenous Christian in Abraham's ethnic community is synonymous with rejection and persecution, because it is still considered a threat to the survival of indigenous peoples and their animistic (believing that plants, inanimate objects and other natural phenomena contain souls) worldview.

Within the region of Colombia that Abraham grew up, children between ten and 14 years old were often kidnapped and taken away by illegal armed groups. Children were forced to suffer all kinds of harassment, from sexual violence to physical and psychological torture, all in order to make them into 'war machines' capable of killing and being ready to die.

The problem of recruitment into the guerrilla movement in Colombia is serious. Since the 1960s, almost 17,000 children in Colombia have been recruited by the guerrillas and paramilitaries as child soldiers. Abraham explained that 'the armed groups forced all families to send one or two children to the war. Families that did not send their children ran the risk of being killed themselves. I was on the guerrilla lists to be recruited. My future was to hold a gun'.

The Impossible Becomes Possible

The story of the persecution of Abraham and his family began in 2008, the year in which Abraham's father Rutilio* met Jesus through a group of courageous missionaries who, in the midst of the intense armed conflict, decided to go into the deep and dense jungles of the Colombian Pacific region to evangelise the indigenous ethnic groups of the area.

As well as the pressure from armed conflict, Abraham faces persecution from the indigenous people because of his Christian faith. Although, in theory, Colombian law promotes religious freedom, in a large number of indigenous communities Christianity is penalised and punished since it is seen as a direct

attack on the ancestral, shamanic and cultural principles that govern these communities.

After his conversion, Rutilio was forced to attend a trial where, through force and violence, they tried to make him renounce his faith. After he refused to do so, he was made to do forced labour for the entire community. The combination of all these factors caused Abraham to be sent secretly to the Children's Centre – a place where he could study, and be safe from war and persecution.

It gave the impossible dream of Abraham the possibility of coming true!

"I remember that when Abraham arrived he was a quiet and very fearful child. His drawings were often violent. He was drawing the weapons of war familiar to him: guerrillas in uniform and sad faces. His drawings were reflections of everything he had experienced," said Pastor Alberto* Director of the Open Doors Children's Centre.

From Guns to Guitars

The process of Abraham's readjustment was not easy. However, immersed in an environment of biblical teachings, the company of other children, and the care of tutors and teachers, Abraham found a place where he could feel safe. It became a refuge where talent emerged that Abraham did not previously know he possessed.

He became a great musician, learning to play instruments, such as the lead and bass guitar, the piano and drums. Music became the main vehicle of expression for Abraham. The boy whose future was to hold a gun today holds a guitar and sings praise to God in the company of others just like him at the Children's Centre.

In the Children Centre, Abraham plays instruments that, when living in his former community, he did not even know the name of. Undoubtedly, Abraham has served as an inspiration to the new kids, who see something fun and useful in music.

When Abraham finished his secondary school studies, and, thanks to his talent and effort, he managed to win a scholarship to study international trade at university. This young man, now 18 years of age, wants to be a skilled professional able to provide support and development to his indigenous community. Thanks to the scholarship, Abraham is able to continue living at the Children's Centre. As well as his university studies, he wakes every morning at 5am to take care of the farm animals at the centre. And, in the late afternoons, he teaches the younger children about the work and responsibilities of the farm.

Abraham often speaks with his father, Rutilio, who, in the indigenous community where he still lives, continues to resist persecution, and is an example of peace and God's love. Rutilio has won the respect of his community and leads a group of faithful indigenous Christians, resisting those who see Christ as a threat.

'You are Gifts from God'

Abraham knows only too well that there are still many things to learn. He knows that God is always with him, as well as the prayers of Open Doors supporters from around the world. To all these people, Abraham has the following message: "It is an honour for me that you pray for my life so that God will give me the courage to follow my path. You are gifts from God. Your prayers are a gesture of love from the Lord."

**names changed for security purposes*

For more information please visit:
churchestogether-marketdrayton.org.uk/p4pc

Pakistan

July 5 - World Watch Monitor

Christians matter least in Pakistani politics

worldwatchmonitor.org/background/christians-matter-least-in-pakistani-politics

As Pakistan prepares for elections later this month, the country's minorities - particularly its Christians - have expressed dismay at their lack of representation among the candidates.

Among the thousands of candidates contesting hundreds of provincial and national constituencies across the country, not a single Christian is nominated by any party – from the ultra-right to the liberal left.

In the 210-million-strong nation, minorities account for about 5 per cent of the population, but they remain absent from mainstream politics, with the country's constitution even encouraging segregation between Muslims and non-Muslims in the political arena.

The current political system dictates that there are two types of seats: general seats, which are directly elected and which anyone can contest, but which in reality usually only Muslims win; and reserved seats for women and minorities, which are nominated by the party and filled according to the number of general seats won (proportional representation).

Created in 1956, Pakistan's first constitution initially barred non-Muslims from becoming president. Then in 2010, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) – led by the Bhutto family and considered a liberal party – brought the 18th Constitutional Amendment, which added a further block to minorities: also prohibiting non-Muslims from becoming prime minister.

Until 2002, minorities were only able to vote for their coreligionists for the seats reserved for religious minorities in the provincial and national assemblies (ten in the National Assembly; eight in the Punjab Assembly; nine in Sindh; and three each in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan).

Gian Chand, a Hindu senator, told World Watch Monitor that, before then, the minority parliamentarians who came through the segregated electoral system had little influence, as Muslims controlled the government. "Also, parliamentarians on general seats did not concern themselves with religious minorities in their neighbourhoods because they did not need their votes," he said.

The military dictator General Pervez Musharraf in 2002 introduced the joint electoral system, which allowed minorities to vote on and contest general seats. However, the reserved seats for minorities were kept, in part in recognition of the unlikelihood that a minority candidate would win on a general seat.

But these minority seats were not to be filled through elections but allotted to each political party proportionate to the total general seats gained. So, in the National Assembly, it is expected that out of ten reserved seats for minorities, three major political parties will get two to three seats each.

In practice, the system has proved much more beneficial to the Hindu minority than to the Christian minority. Despite both having around the same share of the total population, Christians have half as many seats due to the Hindu minority's longstanding involvement in politics and greater share of wealth and connections to political parties.

For the upcoming elections, the PPP, which ruled Pakistan between 2008 -2013, has nominated three Hindus on general seats in the province of Sindh, its stronghold. Christians, meanwhile, mainly live in the Punjab province, with several

sizeable neighbourhoods where their population is in the thousands. Lahore has around 0.7 million Christians, with Youhanabad the largest Christian neighbourhood with about 50,000 Christians. Yet no political party has fielded a Christian candidate in this area. *Cont/.. [Long article]*

June 29 - International Christian Concern

Mentally Disabled Christian Beaten for Praying in Jail

persecution.org/2018/06/29/mentally-disabled-pakistani-christian-beaten-praying-jail

ICC has learned that a mentally disabled Christian convicted of committing blasphemy was severely beaten in jail by his fellow prisoners for praying in front of them on June 22, 2018.

Yaqoob Bashir, age 25, was accused by a Muslim cleric, Talib Hussain, of burning pages of a booklet carrying Quranic verses in Mirpurkhas, located in Pakistan's Sindh Province, on June 4, 2015. He was then arrested under Section 295 – B of Pakistan's Penal Code, commonly referred to as blasphemy laws.

While speaking with ICC, Ranjha Masih, a local human rights defender, said, "Bashir was set to have a hearing in court on June 23 and before appearing, the young Christian wanted to pray at night. However, the prisoners with him did not allow him to pray in front of them. When Bashir continued, four of them got annoyed and beat him very badly. He sustained injuries to his face, eyes, chin, and head."

When Bashir appeared before the court on June 23, his shirt and face were covered in dried blood. This got the attention of the Justice Javid Iqbal of the Session Court of Mirpurkhas. When asked, Bashir explained what happened the previous night. Justice Iqbal then issued orders for Bashir to be moved to a separate cell and for the other prisoners to appear before court to testify about the incident.

"It is sad to hear that Christians are not secure even in police custody," Bishop Samson Shukardin, Bishop of the Hyderabad Diocese, told ICC. "It is the duty of the state to ensure the protection of all citizens. If a young Christian is facing violence and torture in jail, then one can only imagine the new heights of persecution."

"At this stage, I am worried for his life," Bishop Shukardin continued. "Allowing an attack on a mentally disabled prisoner shows that the prison authorities are not sincerely trying to protect the citizens nor does the government have a clear policy to curb extremist movements." *Cont/..*

June 21 - CLAAS - Asia Bibi suffering for nine years

claas.org.uk/news/asia-bibi-suffering-for-nine-years

On June 19, Asia Bibi marked spending nine years in prison for a crime she has always denied.

She was arrested on 19 June 2009 when she was accused on charges of blasphemy following a complaint by her Muslim co-worker after an argument about drinking from the same bowl used by the Muslim workers.

The complaint was backed by the local Imam who claimed she had insulted the prophet Muhammad.

She was convicted and sentenced to death by a lower court in November 2010, after the court found her guilty of making derogatory remarks about the prophet Mohammed.

In 2014, the Lahore High Court upheld her death sentence. However, the execution was stayed in July 2015, when the Pakistani Supreme Court agreed to hear her appeal. Her case was due to be heard during October 2016 but unfortunately, the appeal had to be adjourned after one of the three judges, Justice Iqbal Hameed-ur-Rehman, excused himself from the bench, and since then there has been no progress. sensitive issue and the Pakistani government has no will to have a debate or make any changes to this law. *Cont/..*