

Market Drayton Churches Together: Prayer for Persecuted Christians - 20 Mar. 2019

Colombia

14 Feb. Another Colombian pastor killed, leaving the church 'terrified' - World Watch Monitor

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2019/02/another-colombian-pastor-killed-leaving-the-church-terrified>

A Colombian pastor was killed as he left his church last week in the northwest of the country, in a region that has been plagued by violence from armed groups, local sources told World Watch Monitor.

Pastor Leider Molina, 24, had just finished preaching in his church in Caucaasia, Antioquia state in northwest Colombia, on Friday, 9 February. As he stepped outside he was hit by five bullets.

Molina was known as a passionate preacher and an active youth leader working for his church and city, 670km north of the capital Bogotá, the source said.

The Caucaasia region has suffered an escalation in violence for the last 4 months, according to the source. Armed groups fight for control of drug trafficking routes and the ownership of illicit crops.

"Communist guerrillas, paramilitary groups, criminal gangs and drug cartels all see the Church as an enemy to be eradicated because, thanks to the preaching and courageous action of leaders and pastors, many young people have renounced armed conflict and illegal activities," the source said.

Last September two other pastors in the region were killed. Pastor Galarza, a social and religious leader, was shot death in front of his family.

And, as World Watch Monitor reported, Pastor Elnor Martínez Pérez, 55, was murdered outside his home after he refused to help members of a neo-paramilitary group with transport.

The church in the area is terrified, according to the source. "Some Christians have fled with their families, while others have decided to stay awaiting the government intervention. Church leaders, however, continue their work despite the death threats," said the source.

Despite the 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the country's largest armed group, the FARC, killings have not stopped.

"The peace process with FARC has stalled", said Rossana Ramirez, an analyst with Open Doors International's World Watch Research unit.

"In the coming months, it is likely that priests, pastors and church communities will continue to experience pressure and violence 'as normal'".

2 Nov. 18 'I am currently under threat of death for preaching' - Colombian pastor - World Watch Monitor

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/i-am-currently-under-threat-of-death-for-preaching-colombian-pastor>

Violence in Colombia has killed 200,000 people and caused around 7 million to flee their homes over the past

50 years, making them the world's largest internally displaced group of people, World Magazine reported last week.

Violence is especially severe in rural areas. At the border with Venezuela, the magazine spoke with Pastor Juan Martinez, a former member of a cartel who left the group at 16 when he became a Christian.

The pastor says that, along with other spiritual leaders in the area, he is under constant threat of attacks by gangs that demand control over the region and see pastors as an obstacle for establishing their influence.

"I am currently under threat of death for preaching the gospel," the pastor said, adding that church leaders are accused of siding with one armed group against another. But he said that sometimes members of these groups become interested in Christianity, as the pastors "speak about Christ with anyone who comes to their churches".

Some other pastors shared their experiences with World Magazine, saying that armed groups demand some portion of their Sunday offerings and order that their churches don't operate during certain hours.

World also spoke with Emperatriz Arrieta, who had fled to the hills from the city of Medellín years ago and began holding prayer meetings in her home. With the help of missionary groups and churches from Medellín, Arrieta's community built a church there and a pastor travels up the hills on Sundays to lead the service.

Another pastor who used to be a former associate of a Medellín cartel told World that although he left the group 20 years ago, his past connections could still put him in danger. As someone who became a Christian and left the cartel, he says he is now trying to reach out to militants with the Christian message.

3 Dec. 18 Report warns of ongoing and worsening human rights violations - Christian Solidarity Worldwide

<https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/12/03/press/4166/article.htm>

CSW's new report on Colombia concludes that "there is no question that violations of human rights, including attacks on the civilian population and severe restrictions on religious freedom, continue or have grown worse in many parts of the country," despite the 2016 peace agreement.

The report details a wide range of violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and freedom of conscience, the majority of which take place in the context of a wider armed conflict and criminal violence in the country. Violations documented include prohibition of or severe restrictions on religious activity, and threats, extortion, assassination and forced displacement of church leaders. This includes the murder of a 55 year old pastor by an illegal armed group in Antioquia.

Dates of next meetings: Wednesdays 17 Apr, 15 May, 19 June & 17 July.

Report download from:

<https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/11/27/report/4164/article.htm>

Extracts from: Restrictions on freedom of religion or belief

Freedom of assembly

In some regions illegal armed groups have prohibited or severely restricted religious activity, and in areas under their influence or control they often enforce strict rules and curfews prohibiting free movement. This results in regular infringement upon the freedom of assembly and FoRB for people in these locations.

Illegal armed groups exerting control

CSW's interviews with pastors in Antioquia revealed troubling developments. As part of their strategy to bring entire communities under their authority and control, illegal armed groups have diversified their tactics. Pastors informed CSW that in most months throughout the year the groups hold obligatory community meetings. In addition, in some areas they have advised church leaders that they must allow members of the groups into their homes: to sleep, be fed, and be referred to as a family member who has arrived to live with them.

One pastor reported, "The Commander told me that I must stay and live in your house and if someone asks who I am, you must say that I am your relative, that I am a cousin, nephew, whatever it may be..." Three church leaders told CSW that they had been forced to allow a member of an illegal armed group into their home to live with them. This puts church leaders in a difficult position: if government officials or security forces come to the community the church leader is expected to lie to protect the member of the illegal armed group.

Attacks on religious leaders

Attacks on religious leaders across the country are widespread. A recent study by the Bogotá mayor's office found that over the past three years 12.6% of religious leaders in Bogotá have received death threats, 4.1% have faced extortion and 3.9% have been threatened with kidnapping because of their religious activities or beliefs.⁷ During the same time period over half of the religious leaders in Bogotá reported that they had witnessed at least one case of extortion, kidnapping or threats to the life of another religious leader because of their religious activities or beliefs.

Church leaders living in rural areas affected by the internal armed conflict are particularly vulnerable as they often, by default, hold a leadership role within the wider community, not just within their church; this makes them a target for illegal armed groups. Targeted leaders are usually those who challenge the presence of organised crime and illegal activities or those helping victims of the internal armed conflict.

Extortion

CSW receives regular reports that various illegal armed groups attempt to co-opt church funds by extorting churches and church leaders. One pastor reported that between 2016 and May 2018, illegal armed actors

repeatedly contacted him by telephone, forcing him to make relatively large payments to top up their mobile phones. Another pastor has been receiving threats and warnings via his mobile phone since 2016, asking him when he is going to leave the region, because 'they' are waiting for him to do so. In June 2018 two young men whom the pastor believes to be linked to an illegal armed group came to him and demanded money for fuel. They returned on a second occasion, demanding money. A third pastor told CSW that in 2018, two members of an illegal armed group parked their motorbikes in the foyer of the church and forced the treasurer to ring the pastor because they wanted money.

Death threats

Threats made by illegal armed groups are not always limited to individuals. On 14 July 2018 a neo-paramilitary group identifying itself as the Águilas Negras threatened to kill a group of social leaders, human rights defenders, organisations and journalists.⁸ The Mennonite association Justapaz was included in the list. The Águilas Negras were also behind threats against 'all evangelical churches' in the cities of Barranquilla and Sincelejo in January 2015.⁹ CSW partners believe that the threat was likely issued because of the social involvement of the individuals and groups named with victims of the internal armed conflict.

In 2017 the OHCHR registered 441 attacks, including 121 killings, of which 84 were against human rights defenders with leadership roles.¹⁰ The OHCHR also recorded 41 attempted killings and 213 threats. According to the report, 64% of killings occurred in Areas Most Affected by the Conflict (ZOMAC)¹¹ and where the FARC-EP had a historical presence. According to the Colombian civil society platform Pacifista, 133 civil society leaders have been murdered in 2018 so far.

Non-conflict related religious freedom problems

Indigenous communities experience severe restrictions on their religious freedom. Indigenous people who convert to Christianity are often forcibly displaced from their indigenous communities or excluded from receiving certain benefits by indigenous authorities, generally known as cabildos. Under the Law of Autonomy, indigenous communities are empowered to govern themselves in a traditional manner and in a way that protects their culture.

These violations are largely rooted in a 1998 Constitutional Court ruling that, in a split judgement, upheld the right of traditional authorities to enforce the observation of and participation in traditional religious beliefs and practices on indigenous reserves. The same court and lower courts have referred to the 1998 decision in subsequent religious freedom cases, reaffirming the right of indigenous governors to prohibit the practice of 'non-traditional' religions on indigenous reserves. In some communities the traditional authorities have taken this ruling to mean that they have the authority to define what those traditional beliefs are, and to punish those who decline to profess or participate in traditional beliefs.

Other Countries

Iran:

20 Feb. Iran: Arrests of Christians continue - Open Doors

<https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/iran-190221>

Christians in Iran continue to be arrested, following a major crackdown on believers over the New Year period.

In January, Sina Moloudian (26) was violently arrested in his house. Sina was reportedly told that he had been 'under surveillance for months'.

The same week, Ismaeil Maghrebinejad (64) was also arrested. A follower of Christ for 40 years, he is no stranger to persecution. Ismaeil has contacted his family, but he does not know where he is being held, nor on what charges.

Iranian Christians have also requested prayer for Simin Soheili and Yaser, two converts who have been held in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison since the end of January. Simin has been informed she will be charged with disturbing public order, propagating Christianity and connecting with foreign entities. She is facing a ten-year prison sentence.

Yaser, who is not related to Simin, has a teenage son with severe physical disabilities.

Stand with your church family in Iran

Iranian Christian Maryam Naghash Zargaran spent four years in Tehran's Evin Prison for 'violating national security'. Open Doors held a worldwide letter-writing campaign for her during her time in prison, but most of the letters were withheld from her. When she was released she was finally able to read your encouraging words!

Open Doors advocates for those who are imprisoned for their Christian faith in Iran and organises trauma care conferences for former prisoners who now live in Turkey. Thanks to your support, over 30 ex-prisoners from Iran received trauma-care training last year.

"It was a joy for me to be part of the training," says former house church leader Wahid, who now pastors a church of 200.

"As a former prisoner, I have often felt alone, and thought nobody cared about me. This training proved me wrong.

"In daily life I find it difficult to talk about my time in prison, it's a horrible story. And, as a leader, it's a big temptation to pretend you are stronger than you actually are.

"In the training, I met people who went through the same experience as me. We understood each other, and we learned from each other. I cried a lot, but I was also comforted a lot. To heal from my experience is a painful process. Some wounds are healed, others not yet. But, with the experiences and teaching at the training event, I have become stronger as a leader."

'I have become stronger'

"The training has offered me long-lasting refreshment," shares former house church leader, Saman. "My friends say I have become stronger since I attended.

"I'm still talking with God about my future. It is in His hands. I would most prefer to go back to Iran and serve the Lord there. But there is a prison sentence waiting for me. I would be willing to do it, but I know it would destroy my mother to know I was in prison. It's a difficult choice. Maybe God is teaching me something here that I can use when I am back in Iran."

Iran: Appeal hearing for Shamiram Isavi Khabizeh - Middle East Concern

<https://www.meconcern.org/2019/02/18/iran-appeal-hearing-for-shamiram-isavi-khabizeh-2>

Iranian Christians have requested prayer for an appeal hearing, to be held tomorrow (19 February), in the case of Assyrian Christian Shamiram Isavi Khabizeh.

On 6 January 2018, Shamiram was sentenced to five years' imprisonment by Judge Ahmadzadeh of Tehran Revolutionary Court for acting against national security and acting against the regime by organising small groups, attending a seminary abroad and training church leaders and pastors to 'act as spies'.

During the appeal hearing on 9 May 2018, which lasted about three hours, the prosecutor and the judge spoke disrespectfully to Shamiram and accused the whole family of a variety of unsubstantiated crimes against the regime. Shamiram's lawyer was allowed to speak, but Shamiram herself was not given an opportunity to respond to the allegations.

Shamiram's husband, Pastor Victor Bet Tamraz, was sentenced on 4 July 2017 to ten years' imprisonment for acting against national security. Together with pastor Victor, three Christian converts, Amin Afshar Naderi, Kavian Fallah Mohammadi and Hadi Asgari also received prison sentences of between ten and fifteen years for similar 'offences'. Their sentences are under appeal after a preliminary hearing on 25 April 2018.

Iran: update on court hearing of Shamiram Isavi Khabizeh - Middle East Concern

<https://www.meconcern.org/2019/02/21/iran-update-on-court-hearing-of-shamiram-isavi-khabizeh>

We recently requested prayer for Assyrian Christian Shamiram Isavi Khabizeh, facing an appeal hearing on 19 February. She is appealing a five years sentence, handed down on 6 January 2018, for acting against national security and acting against the regime by organising small groups, attending a seminary abroad and training church leaders and pastors to 'act as spies'.

At the appeal hearing, the judge was reportedly confused as to whether her case was to be combined with two other cases. The other cases involve Victor Bet Tamraz (Shamiram's husband), their son Ramiel Bet Tamraz and Christian converts Amin Nader Afshari, Hadi Asgari and Kavian Fallah Mohammadi as well as two others.

Pastor Victor was sentenced on 4 July 2017 to ten years' imprisonment for acting against national security. Amin, Hadi and Kavian also received prison sentences of between ten and fifteen years for similar 'offences'. These sentences were issued by Judge Ahmadzadeh of Tehran Revolutionary Court. It was reported on 14 January 2019 in the Iranian press that Judge Ahmadzadeh has himself been suspended from duty in relation to corruption charges.

On 11 July 2018 Ramiel (Pastor Victor and Shamiram's son) and two others were sentenced to four months' imprisonment. The month spent in Evin Prison at the time of Ramiel's arrest will count towards the penalty, but the conviction is under appeal.

At the next court hearing, which has not yet been scheduled, it is possible that these different cases will be combined.

Links to the full reports featured on this sheet, along with information about other relevant articles are available on the Market Drayton Churches Together website, linked from the P4PC section as "Recent Reports"

churchestogether-marketdrayton.org.uk/p4pc

Pakistan

13 Mar. Asia Bibi's Daughter Appeals To Pakistan To Let Her Mother Leave - Release International

<https://releaseinternational.org/asia-bibis-daughter-appeals-to-pakistan-to-let-her-mother-leave>

Asia Bibi's youngest daughter has appealed to Pakistan's Prime Minister to let her mother leave the country, according to press reports. She's encouraged Asia to have faith that God will bring her out.

Asia Bibi, who has been declared not guilty of blasphemy charges by Pakistan's Supreme Court, is still reportedly unable to leave the country. Release sources say she is in good health, contrary to other reports.

She is said to be in protective custody to keep her safe from vigilantes as she endures an agonising wait to fly to freedom.

According to The Mail on Sunday, Asia's daughter Eisham has appealed to Pakistan's prime minister to let her mother leave the country.

Faith

Eisham, who's 18, has encouraged her mother to continue to have faith that God will bring her out to safety.

The MoS says Eisham is able to call Asia from Canada where her daughter now lives with her 21-year-old sister Esha.

Eisham said she missed her mother and thought about her all the time. 'I say to her: "Have faith in God, because if God can release you from jail, God can release you from where you are now. He will bring you out."'

Canada

It has been nine years since Eisham was last able to hug her mother. She has appealed to Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan to allow her to leave the country. She hopes Asia will one day be able to join her daughters in Canada.

Asia Bibi is innocent of blasphemy and has been acquitted – twice – by the highest court in the land. With militants still calling for her death, Release International believes she will never be safe in Pakistan and must be allowed to leave.

17 Mar. Pakistani Christian Woman Abducted and Coerced into Conversion - ICC

<https://www.persecution.org/2019/03/17/pakistani-christian-woman-abducted-coerced-conversion>

Earlier this month, Saima Iqbal, a 35-year-old Pakistani Christian mother of three, was abducted by a Muslim man and allegedly forced to convert to Islam.

Naveed Iqbal, Saima's husband, told local authorities that his wife was abducted from their home outside of Islamabad by a man named Muhammad Khalid Sati. After returning home from a night shift, Mr. Iqbal was shaken by his wife's disappearance. He soon made a complaint to the local police, reporting the incident.

Mr. Iqbal said, "The police did not take immediate action in respect of my application. They lodged a police First Information Report (FIR) only after I threatened to harm myself."

After 10 heart-wrenching days of searching, the police finally found Saima. However, contrary to Mr. Iqbal's hope for a joyous reunion with his wife, the police notified him that she had converted to Islam and married the accused.

Fortunately, the conversion and the marriage certificates are fake, as they do not contain a cleric's signature. Mr. Iqbal has appealed to the Pakistani Prime Minister and Pakistan's chief justice to help him get justice for his family.

"I have challenged the forced conversion and the forced marriage of my wife in a magistrate's court," said Mr. Iqbal. The magistrate's court has reportedly set March 19 as the hearing date.

Sudan

15 Mar. Persecution Report Claims Over 70 Churches in Nuba Region Destroyed or Burned Over Past Year - ICC

<https://www.persecution.org/2019/03/15/report-claims-70-churches-nuba-region-destroyed-burned-past-year>

According to the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART), a UK based NGO, 32 churches have been burned down in the Nuba Mountains region of Sudan over the past year. They said that another 40 have also been demolished. The Nuba Mountains is home to the Sudan People's Liberation Movement North, a rebel group fighting the oppression of the Sudanese National government. Due to this, the Sudanese government has been committing genocide against the people living in the Nuba Mountains for years.

They indiscriminately bomb the region, trying to clear it of the rebel army. However, they often just kill and maim the local civilian population who has nothing to do with the fight. They also destroy homes and churches in the attacks. The people living in the Nuba Mountains are primarily traditional believers or Christians. This also contributes to the attacks, as Bashir, the country's president, believes that the country is only for Muslims ever since South Sudan gained its independence.

Sudan ranks as the 6th worst persecutor of Christians in the world according to the World Watch List by Open Doors.

Kenya

11 Mar. Pastor of Underground Church in Kenya Beaten Unconscious - Morningstar News

<https://morningstarnews.org/2019/03/pastor-of-underground-church-in-kenya-beaten-unconscious>

Ethiopia

1 Mar. Muslim Mobs Attack 10 Church Buildings in Ethiopia - Morningstar News

<https://morningstarnews.org/2019/03/muslim-mobs-attack-10-church-buildings-in-ethiopia>

Nigeria

28 Feb. At Least 40 Christians Killed in Two Attacks in Kaduna State, Nigeria - Morningstar News

<https://morningstarnews.org/2019/02/at-least-40-christians-killed-in-two-attacks-in-kaduna-state-nigeria>

India

7 Mar. Churches Deprived of Their Worship Buildings in Tamil Nadu, India - Morningstar News

<https://morningstarnews.org/2019/03/churches-deprived-of-their-worship-buildings-in-tamil-nadu-india>

4 Mar. Report Shows 57 Percent Jump in Aggression against Christians in India - Morningstar News

<https://morningstarnews.org/2019/03/report-shows-57-percent-jump-in-aggression-against-christians-in-india>

China

4 Mar. China Promises Financial Rewards for Reporting Christians - Open Doors USA

<https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/china-promises-financial-rewards-for-reporting-christians>

6 Mar. Official Clergy Purged for Not Being Communist Enough - Bitter Winter

<https://bitterwinter.org/clergy-purged-for-not-being-communist>