

Market Drayton Churches Together: Prayer for Persecuted Christians - 18 Sep. 2019

Eritrea

18 Jan - Eritrea Statement ahead of the 32nd UPR - CSW
www.csw.org.uk/2019/01/18/report/4211/article.htm

In 2016 the UN Commission of Inquiry into the human rights situation in Eritrea concluded that there were reasonable grounds to believe that crimes against humanity have been occurring since 1991, including enslavement, imprisonment, enforced disappearance, torture, persecution, rape, and murder. Tens of thousands of Eritreans remain detained without charge or trial in life threatening conditions in more than 300 sites across the country.

This month, Eritrea's human rights record will be challenged at the 32 Session of UN's Universal Periodic Review. CSW urges Member States to support the creation of a regional or international mechanism "to ensure accountability for continuing and past human rights violations and crimes against humanity" and to ensure the Human Rights Council formulates verifiable time-bound benchmarks to monitor Eritrea's commitment and progress in implementing accepted recommendations.

Cont/...

10 Sep - Pastor tells of torture, starvation and hard labour endured by Christian prisoners in Eritrea - Barnabas Fund
barnabasfund.org/en/news/pastor-tells-of-torture-starvation-and-hard-labour-endured-by-christian-prisoners-in-eritrea

An Eritrean pastor, now resettled in Australia, has described how Christians are tortured, starved and forced into hard labour in Eritrea's notorious jails, and how his faith sustained him during long years of cruel incarceration.

"Gabriel" was first imprisoned in 1998 when he was rounded up with his church congregation and detained for a month. His next jail term was supposed to last six months but went on for three agonising years, because he was a pastor.

He told Barnabas prisoners were given only small amounts of food every 18 hours, yet they were all forced to do back-breaking manual work collecting stones for building materials. "Sometimes you break the stones with a heavy hammer. You hear a sound here, in your back, because everyone has malnutrition," he said. The guards discriminated against Christian believers, refusing them medical treatment if they fell sick.

Like thousands of other Christian prisoners in Eritrea, Gabriel was held in a metal shipping container by authorities. He described the stress of two weeks he was locked in a container by prison authorities, in solitary confinement, with baking hot temperatures during the day and freezing cold at night. He begged the guards to allow him some painkillers but they refused.

As a pastor and theological graduate, Gabriel was singled out for beatings. On one occasion he was tied up on the orders of the colonel in charge of the jail who then hit him repeatedly on the head with a stick for an hour "like a donkey" in front of 230 other prisoners "to make them afraid". A sympathetic nurse who treated Gabriel's wounds urged him to renounce his Christian faith in order to stop the beatings, and resume it again when he was released from prison. But Gabriel refused to deny the Lord who had laid down His life for him.

He recalls other Christians received similar treatment. Two converts who made the decision to follow Christ while they

were in jail were beaten for three days and tortured by having cold water poured on them each night in punishment, but they stood firm in their faith. "Whatever you like you can do [to us], for now we are born-again Christians," they said. Eventually the guards gave up their torture campaign and released them saying, "We cannot not stop this Christian thing."

Bibles were forbidden in prison and the discovery of any Scripture resulted in severe punishment. Gabriel recalls how the Christian prisoners divided up a Bible and hid it underneath their bedding. He was sustained by the book of Revelation, which he taught to other prisoners.

At times Gabriel struggled with his faith. He said, "Sometimes you dispute with God, why you let me go through this hardship? ... But when you start reading the Bible, when you pray devotion daily, automatically your mind clicks, you are in the main way – the way you are supposed to go."

A few years after his release, Gabriel became aware that there were plans to arrest him yet again, and therefore fled Eritrea for Kenya, before he eventually resettled in Australia.

In Eritrea, since religious registration policies were introduced in 2002, only three Christian denominations are legally permitted – Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Lutheran – as well as Sunni Islam. In June 2019, the latest victims of an ongoing government crackdown on Christians in Eritrea were women, some pregnant, and children who were arrested by security forces in a raid on a church in the city of Keren.

10 Sep - No school to go back to: Church-run schools seized in Eritrea - Open Doors UK

www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/eritrea-191009

Following news that Eritrean church-run health centres were shut down earlier in the year, the government has now seized seven secondary schools. These schools were all run by religious organisations: Catholics, other Christian denominations and Muslims.

An order to hand over the schools was given on Tuesday 3 September. The Eritrean government say that the closures are in line with regulations that were introduced in 1995, which impose a limit on the activities of religious institutions. These regulations have seldom been enforced, and it is widely believed that the closures are actually a retaliation to the church's criticism of President Isaias Afwerki. Following the peace deal with Ethiopia, Catholic bishops in Eritrea made a public call for government reform in a 30-page letter.

The schools that have been shut down are attended largely by students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and several of the schools were founded more than 70 years ago.

There has been growing persecution of Christians in the country. As well as the seizing and shutting down of church-run health centres in June, over 150 Christians have been arrested for being members of churches belonging to unregistered (and thus illegal) denominations.

Police regularly raid the homes of Christians from unregistered denominations. When Christians are arrested, they are often told to renounce their faith as a condition of their release. Hundreds of members of unregistered churches are still in prison, with some having been held captive for more than a decade.

Dates of next meetings: 16 October, 20 November & 11 December 2019

3 Sep - Woman relives terror of Christian schoolchildren being rounded up by police in Eritrea - Barnabas Fund barnabasfund.org/en/news/woman-relives-terror-of-christian-schoolchildren-being-rounded-up-by-police-in-eritrea

A young Christian woman has told Barnabas Fund of the “harsh reality of oppression” towards Christians in Eritrea and how, as a child, she and her Bible-club classmates, some as young as five, were seized from a church by police, put in the back of a truck and driven off.

Sophia, now a university student in Australia, describes herself as “a witness to the constant threat that Christian believers face in Eritrea”. She described for us, in vivid detail, how some believers are denied the basic right to worship freely in the north-east African nation and can be seized by police at any moment.

As an eight-year-old, in 2004, Sophia was attending a weekly Saturday Bible class in the capital, Asmara, when uniformed police arrived in a pick-up truck. Sophia had heard that Christians had been imprisoned in Eritrea for their beliefs, but until that moment had never felt in danger.

“My teacher stayed amazingly calm and continued teaching,” she recalled. “But it was not long before two of the officers approached us and ordered us to get into the truck.”

The truck was overloaded with children, some as young as five, many sobbing and crying, who were taken to a police station where they were ordered to sit on the floor in a big hall. An older child in Sophia’s group told them to start praying, which they did. Other children started to sing:

“Exile or death,
Stress or hardship may come but I am not afraid.
Who can separate me from Jesus,
Who showed me His love on the cross.”

Sophia joined in the singing. “For a moment, there was hope and I felt like a hero, partaking the suffering for the sake of the One I believe in,” she said.

“Suddenly, one officer stormed in and started kicking and slapping every kid in front,” said Sophia. “The room went silent. He rebuked us and reminded us that we are at a police station and not in church.”

The children remained in the hall in silence for hours until police returned and took their details and addresses. The police released all those aged under 12, including Sophia. The older children were kept in detention.

“That was the last day I went to church in my country,” recalled Sophia. “The remaining years, we lived in a constant fear with my family as many arrests continued from the church including the main leaders who are in prison until today. The images from the day remain vividly in my mind, reminding me that I was lucky to be free and there are many Eritreans who are still suffering in jail for the same reason.”

She said, “Going to a church is one of the basic rights in many countries, but so many Eritreans yearn for the day to come that they gather to worship freely. Here in Australia, I go to my local church and serve as a Sunday school teacher in the church. I pray to see the day that I will visit my country one day and visit the church I grew up in. Glory be to God.”

In Eritrea, since religious registration policies were introduced in 2002, only three Christian denominations are legally permitted – Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Lutheran – as well as Sunni Islam. In June 2019, the latest victims of an ongoing government crackdown on Christians in Eritrea were women, some pregnant, and children who were arrested by security forces in a raid on a church in the city of Keren.

1 Sep - We will not negotiate our faith - Christians tell judge they will continue to follow Jesus - Open Doors USA

www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/we-will-not-negotiate-our-faith-christians-in-eritrea-tell-judge-they-will-continue-to-follow-jesus

“We will not negotiate our faith and will continue following Jesus.”

The bold words of six Christian government employees in Eritrea came on August 16 when officials pressured them to recant. The employees were taken to what is described as an informal court inside a military command center in the capital city of Asmara where a judge instructed them to renounce their faith.

On hearing their response, reportedly the judge angrily told the believers to “leave while he considers next steps,” according to a source who remains anonymous for security reasons.

The incident is part of an intensifying crackdown on Christians in the East African country. Since the end of June, 150 Christians have been arrested in Asmara and Keren, Eritrea’s second-largest city approximately 56 miles northwest of Asmara.

The first arrest took place on Sunday, June 23. Security officials rounded up 70 Christians (35 women, 25 men and 10 children) from the Faith Mission Church of Christ in Keren. This is the only church that has remained open there. They also closed the church-run school.

We know that the group arrested in Keren is being kept in very harsh conditions in a prison complex called Ashufera near the town of Hagaz about 15 miles from Keren. The complex consists of underground tunnels and is far from the main road.

This means that anyone who wants to visit loved ones there must walk a minimum of 30 minutes to reach the entrance. Inmates are said to be forced to dig additional tunnels when officers need extra space for more prisoners.

The intensified government action has sent other Christians from Keren into hiding.

23 Aug - At least 150 Christians arrested in Eritrea clampdown - World Watch Monitor

www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2019/08/at-least-150-christians-arrested-in-eritrea-clampdown

At least 150 Eritrean Christians were arrested by government officials during the last two months, with some of them held in an underground prison made up of tunnels.

The most recent arrests occurred 18 August when Eritrean security officials detained 80 Christians from Godayef, an area near the airport of the capital, Asmara. They were taken to a police station and have been held there ever since, a local source told World Watch Monitor.

Four days later, on 22 August, the United Nations observed its first annual commemoration of victims of religiously motivated violence. “On this day, we reaffirm our unwavering support for the victims of violence based on religion and belief. And we demonstrate that support by doing all in our power to prevent such attacks and demanding that those responsible are held accountable,” said UN Secretary-General António Guterres.

Cont/...

Also see:

25 Jun - Church raided and Christians arrested - CSW
www.csw.org.uk/2019/06/25/press/4378/article.htm

29 Aug - Clampdown Against Christians Continues -VOMC
www.vomcanada.com/er-2019-08-29.htm

8 Aug - Patriarch Excommunicated - VOMC
www.vomcanada.com/er-2019-08-08.htm

Other Countries

Asia Bibi & Pakistan

31 Aug - Asia Bibi pleads for justice for victims of Pakistan's harsh blasphemy laws as she plans to settle in Europe - The Telegraph

www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/08/31/asia-bibi-pleads-justice-victims-pakistans-harsh-blasphemy-laws

As Asia Bibi sits free at last in a secret location in Canada, the Pakistani Christian woman who spent years on death row after a false blasphemy charge thinks of those left behind still facing the same ordeal.

Nearly four months after the 54-year-old finally left Pakistan following a miscarriage of justice that caused worldwide outcry, she has the opportunity to rebuild a new life for her and her daughters.

Yet while she is enthusiastically grateful for the international efforts to free her, she says the world should know that Pakistan's harsh blasphemy laws have left many others still behind bars.

In her first ever newspaper interview, she told The Sunday Telegraph she had at times fallen into despair after being sentenced to death in a case condemned around the world.

She also spoke of her heartbreak at being forced to leave her homeland, amid fears she would be murdered by religious extremists even after Pakistan's supreme court had quashed her flimsy conviction.

Her freedom was finally secured with mediation from a European Union special envoy, Jan Figel, a Slovak politician who has now for the first time spoken about negotiations to secure Mrs Bibi's release as she was held in protective custody for months even after her release from prison.

While she is currently in Canada, she is hoping to move to an undisclosed country in Europe in the coming months.

Cont/...

9 Sep - Asia Bibi calls for justice for victims of Pakistan's blasphemy laws - Open Doors UK

www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/pakistan-190909

5 Sep - EU Envoy's threat of trade sanctions played crucial role in Asia Bibi's freedom - World Watch Monitor

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2019/09/eu-envoys-threat-of-trade-sanctions-played-crucial-role-in-asia-bibis-freedom>

12 Sep - Tortured to Death by Police - VOMC

www.vomcanada.com/pk-2019-09-12.htm

Nigeria

2 Sep - "She is alive": an update on Leah Sharibu - Open Doors UK

www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/nigeria-190902

Many of you have been faithfully praying for Leah Sharibu since she was taken by Boko Haram in February 2018. Thank you. Praise God, on 31 August the Nigeria Government confirmed that she was still alive. It is wonderful to have clarity on this point, but let's keep praying.

On Saturday, a government spokesperson gave a statement saying that Leah was alive, and confirmed President Muhammadu Buhari's commitment to her safe return. Garba Shehu, from the government's media and publicity team, relayed assurances from their security agencies and said that 'lines of communication remain open with the kidnappers, ISWAP, to secure the release of Leah Sharibu'.

Leah's parents have urged Christians to keep praying for their daughter. Her mother, Rebecca, said "I know that all over the

world believers are praying and advocating for the release of my daughter, but until now I haven't seen my Leah. I want to plead that Christians do not get tired of praying for her, until she is returned."

31 Aug - Presidency Gives Latest Update On Leah Sharibu - Nigeria News

<https://www.naijanews.com/2019/08/31/just-in-presidency-latest-update-leah-sharibu>

1 Sep - Nigeria Says Leah Sharibu Is Alive; Herdsmen Attacks Continue - Morningstar News

morningstarnews.org/2019/09/nigeria-says-leah-sharibu-is-alive-herdsmen-attacks-continue

4 Sep - Widowed Mother of Seven Homeless when Muslim In-Laws Learn She Is Christian - Morningstar News

morningstarnews.org/2019/09/widowed-mother-of-seven-homeless-when-muslim-in-laws-learn-she-is-christian

The 8-year-old boy didn't realize that telling his Muslim relatives how much he enjoyed a church choir would cause them to attack his family.

The seventh and youngest child of 54-year-old Lezia Nakayiza, widowed since September 2018, he didn't know that his family was keeping their faith secret in Kasenge village, Wakiso District, in central Uganda near the capital city of Kampala.

"I could not share my faith with the brothers of my husband as well as the relatives who are radical Muslims," Nakayiza told Morning Star News by phone. "In June my younger son told one of the relatives of the wonderful choir at church, and that we have been attending the church since March. This was the beginning of our persecution."

Word began to spread that relatives of her late husband, Sheik Kiita Suleiman, were planning to punish her for leaving Islam.

"A Christian neighbor informed me that the family was planning to attack us," Nakayiza said.

They struck on June 20.

"At around 8 p.m. by the light from moonlight, I peeped through the window and saw many people approaching our house with sticks and other weapons with loud noise from the animals' shed," she said, adding that she heard them shouting, "Away with this infidel!"

As they tried to break through the main door, Nakayiza and her children escaped out the back door, she said.

"We walked on foot for two hours and arrived at the church compound around 11 p.m., and we were received by the pastor," she said.

Her pastor, unidentified for security reasons, told Morning Star News that he learned of the extent of destruction to Nakayiza's home from one of her neighbors the following day.

"The brothers of the deceased husband of Nakayiza did huge destruction: five cows and six sheep killed, iron sheets pulled down, windows and doors destroyed," the pastor said.

The family is now living at an undisclosed location that is not sustainable.

Cont/...

4 Sep - Kidnapped Baptist Pastor in Nigeria Freed after 17 Days of Torture - Morningstar News

morningstarnews.org/2019/09/kidnapped-baptist-pastor-in-nigeria-freed-after-17-days-of-torture

A Baptist pastor kidnapped and tortured last month in Nigeria was released over the weekend after his family and Christian leaders paid a ransom, sources said.

Muslim Fulani herdsmen in Kaduna state who abducted the Rev. Elisha Noma on Aug. 14 received 3 million naira (£6,552) before freeing him on Saturday (Aug. 31), the chairman of the state chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) told Morning Star News.

“He was released after a ransom was paid following a series of negotiations with the bandits on the ransom,” the Rev. Joseph Hayab told Morning Star News in a text message. “We thank God for his mercies. We pray for God’s intervention in the calamity that seems to have befallen us as a nation.”

Pastor Noma, 60, of the Baptist Church Ungwan Makeri in Kaduna, identified the kidnappers as armed herdsmen. After his release, he received medical treatment for injuries while in captivity.

His left hand was broken, and his captors switched on their phone to let his family hear him cry in pain as they beat, cut and burned him to compel them to pay the ransom, according to CAN. He was left with scars from burns on his head and face.

Cont/...

14 Sep - Persecution Red Cross: 22,000 People Missing in Boko Haram Crisis - ICC

www.persecution.org/2019/09/14/red-cross-22000-people-missing-boko-haram-crisis

The crisis in Northern Nigeria has led to tens of thousands of people being killed and abducted. According to the International Red Cross, over 22,000 people are missing since the conflict began. This is the highest number of missing people registered with the organization in any country. This includes many other countries who are going through similar struggles and conflicts.

Most of those who are missing and registered with the Red Cross are children and children. Many of them have been abducted by the organization and forced into slavery, marriage, or to become fighters or suicide bombers. Over the past two years, the terror group has been increasingly using women and children as suicide bombers to wreak havoc in Northern Nigeria.

In recent years, Boko Haram has been unable to attack the Christian Community of Nigeria because they forced them out of Borno State early on in the reign of terror. Due to this, most of their victims have been Muslims or government workers for several years. Yet, they continue to say that they hate anything western, in which they include Christianity. When given the opportunity, they routinely treat their Christian Captives and victims as less than others. This includes victims such as Leah Sharibu and the Chibok girls. Please pray for the families of those who are missing due to Boko Harams hatred and greed.

Burkina Faso

13 Sep - Seven Christians hand-picked to be slaughtered by Islamist militants in Burkina Faso - Barnabas Fund barnabasfund.org/en/news/christians-hand-picked-to-be-slaughtered-by-islamist-militants-in-burkina-faso-says-barnabas

Seven people were identified as Christians and executed while others were freed after Islamist gunmen searched and questioned a group of civilians for evidence of their faith in Burkina Faso on 27 June, a Barnabas Fund contact revealed on 4 September.

“They laid everyone down, looked for signs of Christianity in their baggage. They also asked to see who were not Christians and they freed them, while slaughtering all the Christians numbering seven,” said the contact.

He said that crosses, Christian books and a New Testament were among the items the Islamists discovered among the Christians' possessions.

“They declared that this is the way they will treat all Christians of the country ... unless they become Muslims,” the Barnabas source added.

Cont/...

Iran

12 Sep - Ban schoolchildren who propagate ‘unrecognised’ religions, says Iran’s Minister of Education - Article 18

articleeighteen.com/news/4546

31 Aug - Fatemeh Bakhteri begins one-year jail sentence - Article 18

articleeighteen.com/news/4426

3 Sep - Iran: Christian convert starts one-year prison sentence - Middle East Concern

www.meconcern.org/2019/09/03/iran-christian-convert-starts-one-year-prison-sentence

5 Sep - Appeal hearing postponed for Iranian Christians - Open Doors UK

www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/iran-190905

Algeria

11 Sep - Algeria: Campaign against churches intensifies - Middle East Concern

www.meconcern.org/2019/09/11/algeria-campaign-against-churches-intensifies

27 Aug - Algeria: Campaign against churches continues - Middle East Concern

www.meconcern.org/2019/08/27/algeria-campaign-against-churches-continues

Myanmar

17 Sep - Christian children in Myanmar rescued from war zones, settled in safe villages - Barnabas Fund

barnabasfund.org/en/news/christian-children-in-myanmar-rescued-from-war-zones-settled-in-safe-villages

10 Sep - Two Christians shot in the legs in Myanmar Army offensive make dramatic escape - Barnabas Fund

<https://barnabasfund.org/en/news/two-christians-shot-in-the-legs-in-myanmar-army-offensive-make-dramatic-escape>

30 Aug - Lack of a lunch for all - life in an IDP camp on Myanmar border - World Watch Monitor

www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2019/08/lack-of-a-lunch-for-all-life-in-an-idp-camp-on-myanmar-border

Russia

12 Sep - Place of Worship Shut Down - VOMC

www.vomcanada.com/ru-2019-09-12.htm

Nepal

16 Sep - Social Media Backlash Reflects New Era of Hostility in Nepal - Morningstar News

morningstarnews.org/2019/09/social-media-backlash-reflects-new-era-of-hostility-in-nepal

17 Sep - Pastor in Nepal Receives Death Threats After Testimony Video Goes Viral - ICC

www.persecution.org/2019/09/17/pastor-nepal-receives-death-threats-testimony-video-goes-viral

A PDF version of these notes will be available for download from the P4PC section of the MD Churches Together website: churchestogether-marketdrayton.org.uk/p4pc - then follow the link to "Recent Reports"

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