

Pray for the Persecuted Church

17 December 2020

IRAN: Imprisoned Christian Dangerously Depressed

A woman in Iran is worried about her mother, a Christian woman imprisoned for her faith.

Mary was arrested earlier this year for her Christian activities. On a recent visit, Mary's daughter noticed her mother couldn't answer questions, responding only with one-word answers of either "yes" or "no".

Mary's daughter told VOM partners that her mother is depressed and is not her normal self. She is worried and asks for prayer.

Source: *The Voice of the Martyrs USA*

- Ask the Lord to uphold Mary and bring physical, emotional and spiritual solace and strength.
- Ask the Lord to recall to Mary's mind, promises found in Scripture to provide her with comfort.
- Pray for Mary's release from prison and in the meantime, for her protection from evil. Ask God to somehow use what was meant for harm, instead for good.

INDIA: Christian Pastor Beaten and Left to Die

A Christian pastor was beaten unconscious and left locked in a room to die by radical Hindu nationalists in India's Bihar state.

On 5 October, Pastor Shelton Vishwanathan was attacked by six nationalists as he was distributing Gospel tracts in Tiryani village. The nationalists confronted Pastor Shelton and told him to stop handing out the tracts. After Pastor Shelton agreed to their demands, the nationalists attacked.

The men seized the keys to Pastor Shelton's scooter, took away his phone, and physically assaulted him. The last thing Pastor Shelton recalled happening was the nationalists were threatening to offer him as a sacrifice to their god as they beat him.

"They punched my back and told me that they would offer me as a sacrifice to their deity as a punishment," Pastor Shelton said. "They struck severe blows on my head, so that I soon fainted."

When pastor Shelton regained consciousness, he was locked by himself in a dark room. He was without any food or water.

After several days, an elderly woman who lived nearby heard Pastor Shelton's cries and released him from the room. The elderly woman told Pastor Shelton the door was bolted from the outside and she was scared the nationalists would come after her if they found out she released him.

"Had she not helped, I would not be alive today," Pastor Shelton said. "I fully believe that it was God who sent her to help me."

Sources: *International Christian Concern, Morning Star News*

- Thank the Lord for the rescue of Pastor Shelton. Ask God to heal him of any physical harm resulting from the attack and the captivity.
- Pray too that the Lord will help Pastor Shelton overcome the trauma of the event.
- Pray the Lord will continue to grow His church in India and ask for strength and protection on behalf of those who are sharing the Gospel on the frontlines.

EGYPT: Riots Follow Blasphemy Accusation

Egypt's Minya Governorate region erupted in violence on 25 November after rumours spread that a young, barely literate Christian man named Girgis Sameeh posted a message on Facebook that was considered insulting to Islam.

In al-Barsha, Girgis' hometown, hundreds of Muslims attacked the homes of Coptic Christians, also looting and destroying local businesses. The fury of the mob spread to the church of Abou Sefin, where the congregation was celebrating the beginning of a fast for the Advent season.

Thankfully, there were only a few reported injuries. Due to the intervention of a concerned Muslim neighbour, the family of Girgis received protection from the rioters. Following the skirmish, police arrested about a hundred Muslims and Christians, detaining those from both sides to avoid accusations of bias. At last report, 20 Muslims and ten Christians face two weeks' detention for questioning.

In retaliation to the lockdowns imposed to stop further riots, some Muslim villagers resorted to burning farm buildings used for cattle and feed, as well as boycotting businesses owned by Christians.

Such violent outbursts are not uncommon in Egypt and are often based on rumours. Girgis' brother cannot believe that he would do such a thing, saying, "That's not how he was taught to behave."

Sources: Religious Liberty Prayer Bulletin, Mission Network News, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Watani

- Ask God to provide His peace to this troubled Egyptian community. May the Christians of this region walk in obedience to God's Word, serving as examples of His love.
- Pray for wisdom for the local authorities and protection for Girgis and other innocent civilians caught up in the unrest.
- Uphold those who are now without homes or businesses, and experiencing numerous hardships as a result. Ask the Lord to bless them with needed provision and restoration.

PAKISTAN: Court Acquits Imran Ghafur Masih

The Lahore High Court has acquitted Imran Ghafur Masih, a Christian sentenced to life in prison under Pakistan's blasphemy laws. According to Imran's family, they have moved into hiding following the acquittal due to potential threats from extremists.

On 15 December, the Lahore High Court acquitted Imran after he spent more than 10 years in prison. The development came as a shock to Imran's family. "It is a day of resurrection for us," said Naveed Masih, Imran's brother. "God has heard our cry and we are very thankful to him. It's a Christmas gift for us."

On 1 July 2009, Imran was cleaning his family's bookshop in Hajweri town, located in Faisalabad. He was about to burn some garbage he collected, which included some old books and papers, when he came across a textbook with Arabic writing. Concerned that the book contained religious writings, Imran consulted Hajji Liaquat Ali, his Muslim neighbour.

Ali told Imran to burn the book, so Imran threw it into the fire and walked away. When the book was partially burned, Ali returned and pulled it out of the fire. Ali used this partially burned book to falsely accuse Imran of burning a Koran. According to Imran's family, Ali wanted the storefront leased to the family's bookshop to expand his building materials business located next door.

News of the incident soon spread to local mosques, which made announcements over their PA systems. A mob of approximately 400 enraged Muslims gathered at Imran's home. The mob beat Imran, along with his brother, Naveed, and father, Ghafur, before dousing the Christians with paraffin in an attempt to burn them alive.

Local police intervened, arrested Imran, and took him to the police station. A mob of 1,000 reportedly gathered outside of the police station and demanded Imran be handed to them. The mob chanted, "Hang him who disgraces the Holy Koran... Christians are dogs. Imran is a dog." Police soon registered a blasphemy case against Imran and copies of the charges were distributed to the mob.

On 11 January 2010, the Sessions Court of Faisalabad sentenced Imran to life in prison and a fine of 100,000 rupees under Sections 295-A and 295-B of Pakistan's blasphemy laws. Imran's case was appealed to the Lahore High Court but was postponed nearly 70 times over the course of the next 10 years. According to Imran's lawyer, the appeal passed through the offices of at least 10 justices.

"We went through a very painful time during Imran's imprisonment," Naveed said. "Imran lost his parents and was not allowed to attend the funerals. We lost our business and jobs which has affected our children's education and future. We have not seen any happiness during these years."

In Pakistan, false accusations of blasphemy are common and often motivated by personal vendettas or religious hatred. Currently, 24 Christians are imprisoned on blasphemy charges in Pakistan.

Source: International Christian Concern

- Praise God for this wonderful answer to prayer. May it give cause for celebration for Christians all over Pakistan.
- Pray that Imran and his family will be shielded from those who still wish to harm them. Ask the Lord to bless Imran as he adjusts to life outside of prison and makes plans for the future.
- Pray the Lord will use this case to draw further attention to deficiencies in the justice system and the potential for blasphemy laws to be open to abuse.