



Mali – Swiss missionary killed by jihadists after four years held hostage

Swiss missionary Beatrice Stöckli, kidnapped by Islamic militants four years ago in Mali, has been murdered by her captors, the Swiss foreign ministry announced on 9 October.

She was killed about a month earlier by members of the Islamist terrorist organisation Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslim (JNIM). An affiliate of al-Qaeda in Mali and West Africa, JNIM has been responsible for numerous attacks on Christians and Westerners since its formation in March 2017.

News of the killing was given by French aid worker Sophie Pétronin, who was released on 8 October by Islamic insurgents after a long captivity.

Beatrice Stöckli was kidnapped by armed men from her home in Timbuktu, northern Mali in January 2016. She had been previously been abducted in April 2012 and endured nine days of torture and threats at the hands of jihadi group, Ansar al-Dine, before she was freed. On her release, she had decided to return to Timbuktu to continue her missionary work.

Lift up the family of Beatrice Stöckli, asking that they will be comforted and that her faithful service to the Lord will be a source of joy and hope to them. Pray that her work proclaiming the Word of God will be long remembered and continue to bear fruit in Mali. Ask that the men of violence who abducted her will be led to a personal encounter with the Prince of Peace, who alone can take away the burden of heavy laden hearts (Matthew 11:28).

Iran – Lawyers criticise decision denying Christian converts custody of adopted daughter

An open letter signed by 120 lawyers and activists is calling on the head of Iran's judiciary to overturn a court's decision refusing a Christian couple custody of their two-year-old adopted

daughter because of their faith. The appeal by Christian converts Sam Khosravi and his wife Maryam Falahi against the ruling, issued in July, was rejected on 22 September, despite the judge's initial ruling acknowledging that their daughter, Lydia, who they adopted at the age of three months, had an "intense emotional attachment" to them. The judge said there was "zero chance" that another adoptive family would be found for Lydia because of her chronic health problems.

However, the judge introduced sharia (Islamic law) to rule against Sam and Maryam's continuing custody of Lydia saying that, although the child's parentage and their religion is not known, she is considered a Muslim and should be cared for by Muslim parents.

The letter's signatories have called on the head of the judiciary, Ebrahim Raisi, to annul the verdict. They say that as Iran is a signatory to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is duty bound to consider the child's wellbeing, and that Iran's own constitution makes no reference to a person's religion when denoting who is eligible to adopt a child.

"Nowhere in these laws or regulations is there any mention of the religion of the applicant, but, rather, in the first place, being an Iranian citizen and of good moral character is the criterion for eligibility," add the signatories.

They note that Sam and Maryam are "well respected" and "honourable" Christian citizens. In later seeking to remove Lydia from their care, the state welfare organisation acted "illegally", the signatories write, failing also to take into account Lydia's serious heart condition and the "love and affection between the child and her parents".

Sam and Maryam are appealing against their conviction in June 2020 for "propaganda against the state" relating to their membership of a house church. Sam was sentenced to one year in prison, followed by a two-year exile. Maryam, a nurse, was fined and given a lifetime ban

on working for any national institution, including for the hospital where she had worked for 20 years.

In a separate development, Iranian Christian convert Ebrahim Firouzi, who has already spent six years in prison and nearly a year in internal exile because of his faith, was cleared of fresh charges on 27 September.

The prosecutor dismissed the latest accusations against Ebrahim after a ten-minute hearing. "The reports by agents from the Ministry of Intelligence was the only 'evidence' against me, which was just a bunch of unsubstantiated claims," said Ebrahim.

The 33-year-old had been summoned to the prosecutor's office on new charges of "insulting the sacred", which carries a maximum five-year jail sentence, and "propaganda against the state through promoting the Christian faith", punishable by up to a year in prison.

In August 2013, Ebrahim was arrested and later convicted of charges including evangelism. He was sentenced to one year in prison and a further two years of exile.

Although he completed his sentence in January 2015, Iranian authorities continued to hold him in prison. Ebrahim was charged again in March 2015 with "acting against national security" and sentenced to an additional five years.

When Ebrahim was finally released, in October last year, he was described as being in weakened health because of the interrogations and beatings he endured in jail. He was given just two weeks at home before being sent into exile in a remote town on the Iran-Pakistan border.

Pray to the Lord for whom all things are possible (Mark 9:23) that Sam, Maryam and Lydia will be allowed to stay together as a loving family. Ask for wisdom for Iran's head of justice, Ebrahim Raisi, so that he will stop Lydia from being returned to a state orphanage. Lift up Ebrahim Firouzi who has endured so much in the name of his Saviour (Revelation 2:3) and give thanks that the new charges against him were quashed.

China – Printers face fines, arrest and closure for publishing Christian material

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is stepping up enforcement of its ban on the printing of Christian material by threatening printers with closure, and owners and staff with large fines or imprisonment.

The manager of a print business in Luoyang city, in Henan province, said he was refusing all orders relating to religious material. “Any religious content makes the issue political, not religious,” he said. “Although banners on the streets say people are allowed religious beliefs, the only faith they can practise freely is that in the communist party.”

Photocopying businesses are experiencing similar tough controls. “I don’t even dare to make copies of two sheets with religious hymns because of strict investigations,” said a staff member.

The CPP is also stepping up attempts to prevent information about religious persecution in China from reaching overseas media by threatening pastors with long prison sentences for “leaking state secrets”.

More than 100 pastors in northern China were grilled by local authorities about documents their churches had received, according to the website, Bitter Winter. “Interrogations were extremely rigorous: questions were very detailed, asked time and again,” said a three-self (i.e. state-registered) church leader.

In a separate development, facial recognition cameras are being installed in churches by the CCP to monitor believers and ensure sermons follow rigid government guidelines. About 200 sophisticated cameras were installed in more than 50 three-self church buildings in Poyang county, Jiangxi Province, from July to September. “If cameras capture an unknown face, the police come to determine who the person is,” said a pastor.

In a meeting for Christian leaders in Henan province in August, an official revealed that the cameras would be installed province-wide in all

venues belonging to five religions authorised under the constitution – Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam and Protestantism.

A three-self church deacon in Guangdong Province added, “Churches hire security guards to disperse congregants talking in groups, for fear that they say something against the government, and the cameras would capture this. Such incidents may cause a lot of troubles for churches.”

Pray that beleaguered believers in China will remain steadfast in faith in a spirit of meekness (Matthew 5:5), knowing they are inheritors of their Saviour’s heavenly country (Hebrews 11:16), despite growing pressures, scrutiny and interference from authorities that they encounter in their day-to-day Christian lives.

Somaliland – Christian couple to face trial as “apostates and evangelists”

A Christian couple detained for being “apostates and evangelists spreading Christianity” in Muslim-majority Somaliland are to have their case forwarded to court, a police colonel announced at a press conference on 5 October.

Police arrested the couple, who have three children, on 21 September after finding Christian material at their home.

The police colonel threatened that “whoever dares to spread Christianity in this region should be fully aware that they won’t escape the hand of the law enforcement officers and that the spread of Christianity will not be allowed and is considered blasphemy”.

The couple’s arrest and detention caused great concern among the small Christian community in Somaliland and many believers are reported to have fled abroad. Islam is the official religion of Somaliland, which declared independence from Somalia in 1991. Its constitution states that individuals have the right to freedom of belief. However, the constitution also prohibits Muslims from converting to another religion, bars the propagation of any religion

other than Islam and stipulates all laws must comply with the general principles of sharia (Islamic law).

Ask that this courageous Christian couple will remain strong in the Lord, knowing He will never forsake them. Ask the God of all comfort to be with their three children in this time of separation and distress (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). Pray that the couple will be cleared of these false allegations and the family swiftly reunited.

India – Christians in “fear and shock” after extremists warn leave faith or die

Christians were warned “to leave their faith or face fatal consequences” before around 16 of their homes were razed by extremists in India’s Chhattisgarh State on 22 and 23 September.

The series of “brazen and perilous” attacks by extremists on three villages in the district of Kondagaon have left the Christian victims in a state of “fear and shock”, according to the Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI).

It said no action has been taken against the attackers, even though complaints were lodged at Kondagaon police station. Instead, the victims are being pressured by the authorities to agree to a “compromise”, said EFI.

Warning of a “build-up of a large mob threatening the peace and harmony in the area as well”, EFI called on the authorities to provide urgent protection for Christians.

“We urge you to take immediate and swift action in providing security and safeguarding the constitutional right of the victims to profess and practise their faith,” added EFI in a letter to Chhattisgarh’s chief minister of state.

Pray that persecuted Christian families in Chhattisgarh will be held by the LORD’s right hand and comforted in their anxiety (Isaiah 41:13). Ask that shelter will be found for the 16 families made homeless and that their needs will be provided for. Pray that our mighty King, who loves justice, will steer the authorities to take swift action to protect all Christians in the state (Psalm 99:4).

“For we live by faith, not by sight.” – 2 Corinthians 5:7

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