



Pakistan – Christian sentenced to death over “blasphemous” text messages

Pakistani Christian Asif Pervaiz was sentenced to death on 8 September after he was convicted of sending text messages with “blasphemous content”.

The 37-year-old former garment factory worker has been in custody since 2013, when he was accused by his supervisor of sending derogatory text message remarks about Muhammad. Pervaiz denied the charge.

A court in Lahore ordered Pervaiz to serve a three-year jail term for “misusing” his phone before being hanged.

The appeal hearing for Pakistani couple, Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar, against their “blasphemy” conviction on 11 September was adjourned because one of the judges did not turn up. A new date was set for 24 September but then again adjourned. A new date has yet to be set.

The married couple, who have four children, have endured six years in prison on death row after being convicted in April 2014 of sending “blasphemous” text messages to two Muslims.

Shafqat, who is disabled, and his wife Shagufta say that they are illiterate and incapable of sending the messages.

On 10 September, the High Court in Lahore called for medical reports on seriously ill Pakistani Christian Zafar Bhatti after his lawyers asked for bail on health grounds and an early hearing against his conviction for “blasphemy”.

Zafar, a diabetic in his early 50s,

suffered a heart attack in prison on 3 September. He was jailed in 2012 and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2017 after a “blasphemy” conviction for sending texts insulting Muhammad on a phone that was not registered in his name.

In Punjab province, Christian man Sohail Masih was charged with “blasphemy” in August after he was accused by a Muslim leader of insulting Islam in a Facebook post.

Pray that the Lord will save Asif, Shafqat and Shagufta from execution, as well as another five Pakistani Christians currently on death row, falsely accused of “blasphemy”. Ask that the Lord will comfort and protect all of them as well as Zafar and Sohail, and about 20 other Christians currently in prison for “blasphemy” (2 Corinthians 1:3). Ask that the judges will have compassion on Zafar’s medical needs. Ask that Pakistan’s government repeal the unjust “blasphemy” law, which is often used by Muslim accusers to falsely accuse people against whom they have grudge. Christians and other non-Muslims are particularly vulnerable.

Sudan – PM signs agreement to separate religion and state, ending 30 years of Islamic rule

A deal ending Sudan’s 30 years of rule under Islamic law and Islam as the official state religion has been agreed between the transitional government and rebel groups.

Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok

signed an accord with the leader of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N), Abdelaziz Al-Hilu, on 3 September in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

“The state shall not establish an official religion,” says the agreement. “No citizen shall be discriminated against based on their religion.”

The deal comes less than a week after the government signed a peace accord with an alliance of rebel groups, ending decades of conflict in Darfur and the border states of Blue Nile and South Kordofan, which left hundreds of thousands dead and millions more displaced.

While the changes have been welcomed by the Christian minority, especially converts from Islam, and by human rights campaigners in Sudan, Islamists have strongly condemned this and as well as the repeal of the Islamic apostasy law earlier this year.

Praise the Lord for the ending of 30 years of strongly conservative Islamic rule in Sudan for, in the words of our Saviour, with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26). Pray that in this emerging era of greater religious freedoms, more Sudanese Muslims will have the opportunity to hear the Gospel and will be emboldened to make a decision to follow Jesus. Ask for the swift release from prison of Christians convicted under sharia (Islamic) law, who include many women jailed with their children. Pray that peace will prevail and God will restrain any Islamist violence in reaction to the changes.

Eritrea – government releases on bail 69 Christians imprisoned for their faith

A Barnabas contact confirmed on 22 September that the Eritrean government has released 69 Christian prisoners.

Following on from a release of more than 20 male and female prisoners on 4 September, the authorities are continuing to make conditional releases from the Mai Serwa prison, near the capital, Asmara.

The releases, which have been linked to Covid-19 policies, are being made on condition that bail securities are lodged, usually in the form of property deeds, with guarantors held liable for the detainees' future actions.

According to Eritrean Christian leader, Dr Berhane Asmelash, hopes are rising for further significant releases from among the 300 or more Christians, including adults and children, who remain incarcerated in the military jail, which is notorious for subjecting detainees to solitary confinement in metal shipping containers.

Most of the prisoners released so far had been in long term detention for at least a decade, with some languishing in the maximum-security prison without trial for as much as 16 years. While welcoming the news, he flagged that no pastors or other senior Christian leaders known to be in captivity were among those released and urged for prayer for their safety and release.

“Christianity is not a crime. There is no crime being done apart from believing in God,” Dr Berhane commented. “This is an answer to prayer. Thousands of Christians have been praying for this.”

Life will not be easy for those who are released. Dr Berhane explained, “Many have been in prison for a long time. The circumstances they are being released into are very changed. Some will return to friends and extended family, but many will be homeless with nowhere to go. There is no [state] help in Eritrea.”

Dr Berhane called for prayer for the

released prisoners, “People have souls and minds that will need healing. They need to rehabilitate. We need to pray that they will recover from their trauma.”

Eritrea remains one of the worst countries in the world for Christian persecution, where believers of certain denominations are subject to arbitrary arrest and detention without trial. Since the introduction of religious registration policies in 2002, only three Christian denominations are legally permitted – Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran – as well as Sunni Islam.

Thanks be to our God, who hears and answers prayer (1 John 5:15), for the release of the Eritrean Christian detainees after long years held in brutal jail conditions. Pray that they will recover physically, spiritually and emotionally from their ordeal and that those left homeless will find shelter. Ask that all our brothers and sisters still enduring incarceration in Eritrea's prisons will soon be released and for strength for their loved ones who have been separated from them for so long.

DRC – at least 58 people killed in jihadi attacks on Christian-majority region

At least 58 people were killed and 17 kidnapped when Muslim militants attacked two villages in the mainly-Christian north-east of the Democratic Republic of Congo in early September.

Twenty-three people were murdered on 8 September and another 35 were killed two days later in the heavily forested Tshabi area of southern Ituri province. Large numbers of the population have since fled.

“People were killed with every sort of weapon, knives, guns,” said a villager in Tshabi. “Seventeen people are listed as disappeared, but they have almost definitely been kidnapped.”

Members of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an Islamist militant group active in the region for more than two decades, are thought to have carried out the atrocity.

Call on the Lord to comfort the families who mourn for their loved ones (Matthew 5:4) and to provide for their practical needs. Pray for the safe release of the 17 people kidnapped. Intercede for all Christians living with the daily threat of violent attacks simply for owning Jesus' Name, asking that the Lord's strength will be made perfect in their weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). Ask Him to touch the hearts of the men of violence who attacked them, and lead them to a personal encounter with Himself.

Turkey – Erdogan orders second historic church building to be turned into a mosque

Just a month after his controversial repurposing of the UNESCO world-heritage recognised Hagia Sophia basilica, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan ordered another ancient Christian place of worship to be turned back into a mosque.

The presidential decree came on 21 August to transform the St. Saviour in Chora Church building in Istanbul, now Kariye museum, which closely mirrors the history of neighbouring Hagia Sophia Cathedral.

The decision drew criticism from Erdogan's political opponents and church leaders who said the move will deepen religious divides in the country. Repression of religious minorities is increasing in Muslim-majority Turkey, particularly under Islamist President Erdogan, who has been outspoken about his desire to recreate the Ottoman Empire.

Lift up our brothers and sisters in Turkey, asking that they remain steadfast in their faith looking to God as their ever-present help in these times of increasing government pressure on Christians (Psalm 46:1). Ask that ordinary Turkish Muslims will not follow the lead of President Erdogan but will treat the tiny and vulnerable Christian minority with respect.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. – Philippians 4:6

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