

***"Who will arise and plead my right
and guard from numerous foes?
When earth and hell increase my plight,
my anxious worry grows!
'God, hold my sliding feet,' I cried.
'Your statutes are my stay;
Your mercies, constant by my side,
must guide me in Your way.'"***
~ Hymn lyrics by Isaac Watts

PAKISTAN: Teenager Forcibly Married to 60-Year-Old Man

Sources: Kross Koneksi, Morning Star News

Sitara Arif, a 15-year-old Christian girl, was kidnapped on December 15th in Faisalabad, Pakistan. Abducted by the husband of her employer, she was forcibly converted to Islam and then married to her captor. It took almost two months for police to finally register a case against Rana Tayyab, despite repeated pleas from the girl's family.

According to Sitara's father, Arif Masih Gill, the teenage girl provided domestic services for Naila Ambreen, who is employed by the government as a school principal. Because of her government position, Naila and her husband have considerable influence over the police. Therefore, when Arif tried to file a police report, it was outrightly rejected. Additionally, Sitara's family members faced repeated acts of intimidation in an attempt to force them to drop the case.



Sitara Arif
Photo: Morning Star News

The police only responded to the kidnapping after an advocacy group, Minorities Alliance Pakistan, was made aware of the situation on February 3rd and demanded immediate action. When the authorities raided the home of the accused Muslim man, his wife handed police a certificate indicating Sitara's marriage to Rana. The couple claims that Sitara had converted to Islam and married the 60-year-old man of her own free will.

Akmal Bhatti, who serves as the chairman of Minorities Alliance Pakistan, stated that young teen girls from minority groups are targets of forcible marriage because their families are generally poor and do not have the resources to fight in court. "We are continuing to build pressure on the officials nonetheless, so that [the authorities] don't slack in their responsibility," he promised.

According to a 2021 report from *Forbes* magazine, at least 1,000 women from religious minorities are forcibly converted and married annually in Pakistan. The numbers are likely much higher, since many cases go unreported. For more reports on the difficulties being encountered by Christians in Pakistan, go to our [country report](#).

Pray that Sitara will soon be set free from her kidnappers and safely reunited with her family. In the meanwhile, may the Lord grant this teenage girl greatly needed comfort, hope and strength as she awaits the intervention of local authorities. Please also uphold before God's throne of grace Sitara's parents and other concerned family members who are anxiously longing for her hopeful return, asking that they be reassured of His unfailing presence and promises of help throughout this difficult time. Further, pray that those responsible will be held accountable for their wrongful actions, and that such prevailing societal attitudes will shift away from the acceptance of abuse against Pakistan's vulnerable young women and girls.

LAOS: Converts Driven from Their Homes

Sources: Radio Free Asia, International Christian Concern, UCA News

More than a dozen Christian families from the village of Mai in northwestern Laos were driven from their homes by other members of the majority-Buddhist community. This recent incident is the latest in a string of similar attacks against Laotian followers of Jesus, despite the fact that laws have been instituted in this country to protect the free exercise of religion.

Currently, the 15 families, including the village pastor, have no place to live. State authorities are reportedly trying to negotiate with village leaders to encourage them to live in harmony with the Christian families, but to no avail. The families have declined to comment on the situation due to fears of reprisal. Governing authorities are refusing to speak to the press, calling it a "sensitive issue" and stating that they are "still working on the case."



A village in Laos.
Photo: VOMC

Most Laotians consider themselves Buddhist, though many practise a syncretistic mix of Buddhism and tribal animism. While Christianity is allowed, it is viewed by many as a North American religion intent on undermining the Communist regime and Laotian culture. For further information on the persecution of Christians in Laos, go to our [country report](#).

As the authorities work to find a resolution to the conflict, ask God to provide these displaced Christian families a safe haven of refuge and the practical resources they require for their daily survival. May our persecuted brothers and sisters in Laos also receive the spiritual resources they need through the ministry of the Holy Spirit – peace, guidance and strength...as well as the grace to respond to their persecutors with God's love and mercy. Pray that His ministry will powerfully impact the lives of the opposing villagers, opening their hearts to the Gospel message so that peace can be established among the divergent groups of this community.

PAKISTAN: Christian Farmers Killed in Two Separate Attacks

Sources: Kross Konnection, Morning Star News, British Asian Christian Association

Muhammad Waseem, a Muslim landowner in Punjab's Khanewal district, assaulted and killed a Christian farm labourer on February 6th after accusing the believer of stealing oranges from his property. The victim, Emmanuel Masih, was irrigating the orchard at around 3 a.m. when he was approached by Muhammad and four other men. Though Emmanuel pled his innocence, the five men brutally beat the married father of six to death.

According to police reports, no evidence was found to support the allegations of theft, and charges have been laid against the landowner and two of his accomplices. However, Emmanuel's family members wonder if justice in this case will actually be upheld. Speaking of the challenges experienced by Christians in the village, Emmanuel's nephew Zahid Sahotra lamented: "We are



Emmanuel Masih after the assault.
Photo: Morning Star News

very poor and too weak to even think of offending the Muslim villagers. They know that we are helpless and that they can get away with anything, even murder." Without the funds required to obtain the help of a good representing lawyer, the family is concerned that those responsible will soon be released on bail.

This is not the first time a murderous crime was perpetrated this year against a member of Pakistan's vulnerable Christian community. On January 11th, a Christian guava farmer named Allah Ditta was gunned down after confronting three Muslim men who were stealing and destroying fruit from his orchard. An altercation ensued in which the Christian man was called a "chuhra" – a derogatory term used for Christians.

The victim's son, Shahbaz Masih, who happened to be with his father during the incident, reported that the men

derisively stated there would be "no chance at justice," even if they killed the Christian farmer. One of the three assailants, identified only as Usama, then pulled out a gun and shot Allah in the chest. As the perpetrators fled the crime scene, they warned Shahbaz that they would kill him and his family if he contacted the police.

Shahbaz called for an ambulance as soon as the men left, but by then his father was already dead. All three of the men have been arrested and charged for the Christian man's murder. However, the attackers come from wealthy families with strong political ties. The gunman's father, a retired army officer, has offered Allah's family 500,000 rupees (approximately \$2,500 CAD) if they dropped the charges. Although the family refused to accept his bribe, there are concerns of potential retaliation, and the resulting danger it could pose, because of the powerful position held by the former officer.

Thankfully, support is being provided to the family, both from neighbours and advocacy groups. A caring Muslim neighbour stated, "The murderers have killed him without reason and we are standing with the family of Allah Ditta. We are hoping they get justice."

Pakistani Christians often face significant disadvantages when dealing with legal matters because of their poverty and low societal standing. In such cases, the authorities frequently discriminate against religious minorities, demonstrating partiality towards Muslim citizens. To learn more about the persecution of Christians in Pakistan, go to our [country report](#).

Please pray for the grieving families of the two Christian men who were needlessly killed over trivialities relating to the produce of farmed crop, indicating an underlying animosity towards those who follow Christianity. May the victims' loved ones abide in the comfort of God's healing presence during their times of mourning, drawing needed strength, courage and hope from Him. Ask the Lord to prompt fellow believers and others in the community to come alongside them with further encouragement and loving support. Finally, pray for His intervention in Pakistan's judicial system, ensuring that the perpetrators' position in society or other societal advantages will in no way deter authorities from rightfully pursuing justice.

The "Persecution & Prayer Alert" is a ministry of:
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