



Persecution & Prayer Alert

The Voice of the Martyrs Canada
www.vomcanada.com

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*"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing,
give thanks in all circumstances; for this is
the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."*

~ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 ESV

REPORT UPDATES

RUSSIA & OCCUPIED UKRAINE: Heightened Persecution of Christians

Sources: The Voice of the Martyrs Korea, Jubilee Campaign

This Friday, February 24th, marks one year since the Russian offensive in Ukraine began, a war that has resulted in the death of thousands, the destruction of whole cities and the forced displacement of millions of people. The outbreak was triggered by a major escalation of tensions, which have been simmering since the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, and the ongoing struggles with Russian-backed separatists in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.

Ever since Russian forces seized control of various regions of Ukraine, Christians have faced restrictions that were already taking place in Russia. In Russia and the occupied areas, officials mandate that churches must support the Russian government and, consequently, congregations not demonstrating their support have encountered legal consequences. Churches that do not register with the government are perceived to be against the leaders, and religious groups whose theology emphasizes peace and pacifism are viewed with suspicion or described as extremists. Additionally, believers who express their concerns about the war have been treated harshly.

Hundreds of Christians have been accused of illegal missionary activities and, as a result, many of them were subjected to the enforcement of large fines. (To read a previously posted *Persecution & Prayer Alert* report on followers of Jesus in Russia who have been fined for religious activities – including one case in which a believer was charged for simply having a Christian newspaper available for distribution – visit www.vomcanada.com/ru-2023-02-02.htm.)

In the most recent episode of the *Closer to the Fire* podcast, host Greg Musselman is joined by Dr. Eric Foley, who serves as the CEO for VOM Korea. Dr. Foley provides an accurate assessment of the heightened persecution of evangelical Christians in Russia, based on his extensive research and in-depth study of political events. To view this informative video report, go to www.vomcanada.com/ru-videos/video/ru-fined-faithfulness.html.

Pray for the millions of Ukrainian people who are suffering tremendously in their beloved homeland because of the ongoing war. May peace be achieved both politically and spiritually, bringing an end to the violence and destruction. Pray that Christians throughout Russia and occupied Ukraine will be free to worship and practise their faith without oppressive governmental restrictions. Also prayerfully uphold Dr. Foley and the ministry work that VOM Korea is doing in the region to support the ongoing spiritual and humanitarian needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

NIGERIA: Five Years of Captivity for Leah Sharibu

Sources: Leah Foundation, Jubilee Campaign, Mission Network News

In February 2018, Boko Haram militants raided a girls' school in Dapchi, Yobe State, kidnapping 110 students. A month later, it was reported that five of the schoolgirls had died in captivity and all but one of the surviving students were released. The remaining victim, Leah Sharibu, continued to be held captive because she refused to renounce her Christian faith and convert to Islam (see www.vomcanada.com/ng-2018-03-29.htm). Since that time, various reports have surfaced indicating that Leah is still alive. A report in May 2021 stated that she was forced into marriage and had just given birth to a second child (www.vomcanada.com/ng-2021-05-20.htm).

While threats from Boko Haram have diminished somewhat in recent months, Islamic militants remain a daily danger in Nigeria. In many areas, groups of armed Fulani herdsmen attack villages at random but often specifically target Christians. In 2022, more Christians were killed in Nigeria than anywhere else in the world. As the country faces national elections on February 25th, concerns have been raised on whether a change of government can bring positive results. The current president, Muhammadu Buhari, will be stepping down and the two frontrunners to replace him have vowed to defend religious freedoms. However, only time will tell if any real improvements will be achieved.

As we remember the fifth anniversary of Leah's captivity, we call upon Christians around the world to pray for the safe release of this young woman and her children. May the Lord continue providing this dear sister in Christ greatly needed strength, courage and hope as she endures captivity. Pray that Leah's family members will receive encouraging news of her condition and, in the meantime, be likewise reassured by God's peace and comfort. Additionally, please prayerfully remember the thousands of Nigerian Christians living with the threat of danger each day, asking the Lord to minister in their lives and ultimately bring healing and peace to their fractured nation. As the country holds its elections in the coming days, pray that the newly appointed leaders would be mindful of the need to strongly defend the rights of all people, regardless of ethnicity or belief.

NIGERIA: Imprisoned Christian Woman "Traumatized"

Source: Christian Solidarity International

In May 2022, rumours spread that Deborah Emmanuel Yakubu had blasphemed against the Islamic prophet Mohammed during a WhatsApp group chat. Mob violence ensued, resulting in the death of the young Christian woman. In the days that followed, many expressed their shock over the news, including Rhoda Ya'u Jatau, who shared a WhatsApp message condemning Deborah's death. On May 20th, Rhoda was arrested by security agents and accused of public disturbance, inciting contempt of religious creed, and cyberstalking. (For more information, go to www.vomcanada.com/ng-2022-12-22.htm.) She has been held in custody since her arrest.

On February 6th of this current year, Rhoda attended a court hearing in which the testimony of one of her accusers was given. On February 14th, another hearing was held. The case has now been adjourned until March 6th. The family's pastor, Rev. Ishaku Dano, who attended the trial, expressed concerns over the Christian healthcare worker's physical condition. "When I saw her in court, she was looking battered and traumatized," he reports. "She manages to smile, apparently to keep her family from worrying, but you could see it in her eyes that she is dying slowly." Deeply concerned for Rhoda's safety, he asserted, "We are afraid they might be trying to kill her."

Please lift up our suffering Christian sister Rhoda before God's throne of grace, asking for the provision of angelic protection during her imprisonment, as well as greatly needed nourishment, care, comfort and hope. May she also receive His divine intervention in the upcoming legal hearing, leading to her safe release from custody. Mindful of God's instruction to intercede for one's enemies, pray that Rhoda's accusers will readily respond to the conviction of the Holy Spirit so that they may turn from their wicked ways and acknowledge Him as Saviour and Lord. In the midst of Nigeria's ongoing political and religious turmoil, may God's Spirit minister peace to the hearts and minds of our Nigerian family in Christ and convey the life-transforming message of the Gospel to those desperately in need of His eternal salvation.

CHINA: John Cao's Mother Granted Visitation

Sources: ChinaAid, Church in Chains

While John Cao, a Chinese pastor from North Carolina, was working along the border between China and Myanmar, he established 16 schools – providing education to more than 2,000 children. However, in 2017, the Chinese government accused him of "organizing illegal border crossings" between the two countries. In 2018, he was sentenced to seven years in prison, along with a fine (see www.vomcanada.com/cn-2018-08-02.htm).

One of the most difficult challenges facing Christian prisoners in China is being forced to endure prolonged periods of separation from their family members. In Pastor John's case, his elderly mother, Sun Jinhuan, had not been allowed to see him since the pandemic began in 2019. It was

therefore with great joy that she was finally permitted to visit him in prison on February 7th. She reported that police officers treated her with special honour by ushering her near the front of the line and providing assistance as she climbed the stairs to the visitation area.

After meeting with her imprisoned son – a visit that she felt was far too short – the elderly saint was able to declare: "Today God helped me accomplish a huge thing. My heart is full of joy." During their time together, she gave Pastor John news of the family and passed along messages of support from many concerned believers around the world. Upon hearing these encouraging messages, Pastor John replied: "Please tell fellow brothers and sisters from all over the world that I am healthy. Please, don't worry about me."

Praise God that this elderly mother and her imprisoned son were finally able to joyfully meet! Pray that their family will experience continued strength, patience and enduring hope as they await Pastor John's release. God-willing, may this faithful Christian leader be able to reunite with his mother outside of the prison institution once he is released. In the meantime, may he seize every opportunity to boldly testify of Christ to prison officials and fellow prisoners during his incarceration. The same applies to the many other Christian prisoners who are presently detained throughout China. May God provide each one of them ongoing guidance, encouragement and perseverance so they will remain steadfast in their faith and ministry.

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