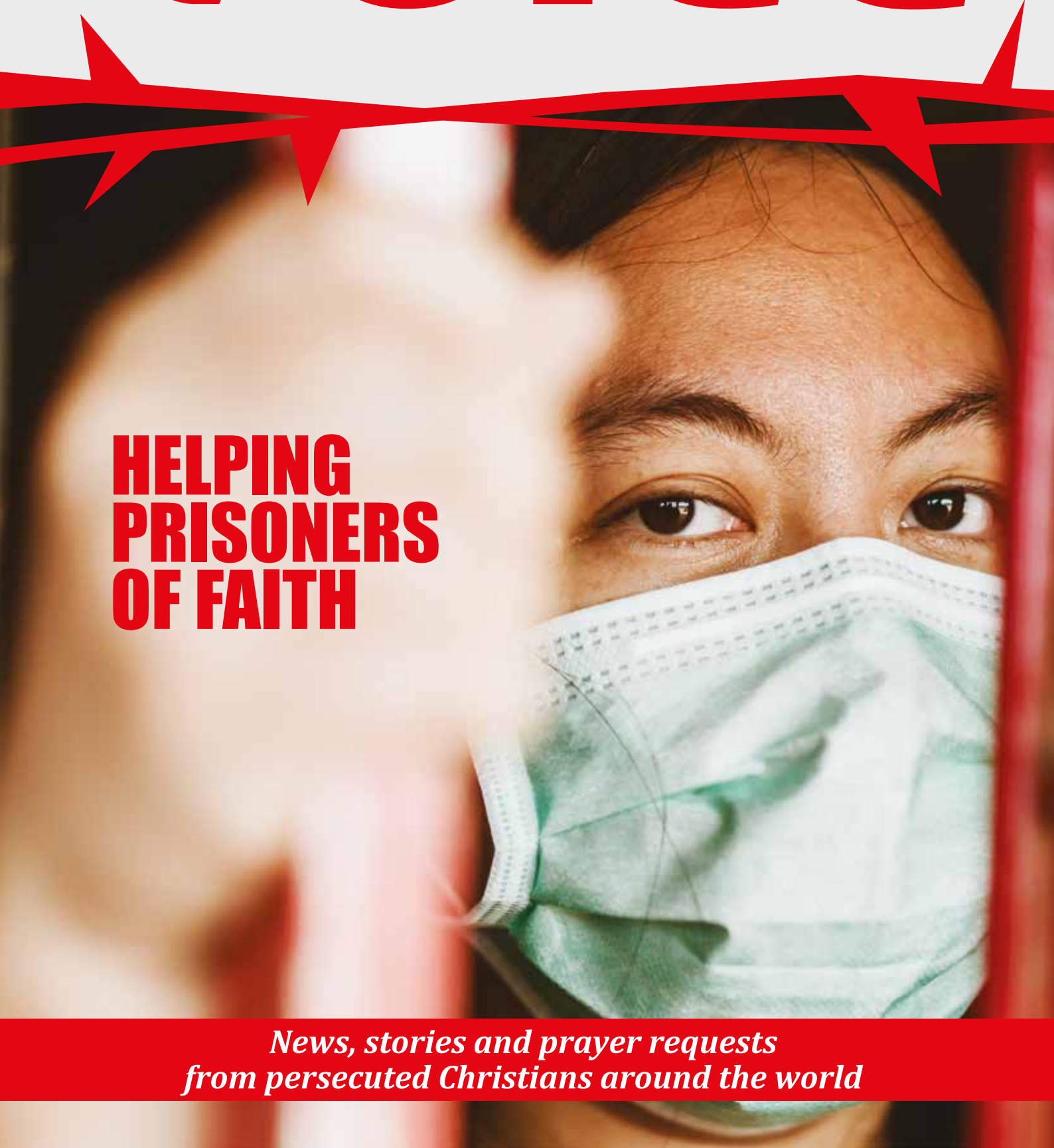


RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

OCT-DEC 2022

voice



**HELPING
PRISONERS
OF FAITH**

*News, stories and prayer requests
from persecuted Christians around the world*



Welcome

by Paul Robinson, CEO

**How would
I respond if
persecuted?**

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RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians

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FR FUNDRAISING
REGULATOR



Faith under fire



Widow sends her thanks

Sarah Ambetsa, whose husband was murdered by Islamist terrorists in an attack on a church near Mombasa, Kenya, in 2014 has expressed her continued thanks to Release International supporters.

'I humbly greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,' she said.

'I am very grateful for the support you continue giving victims of the attack, especially me. The support has really helped me cope with the aftermath and so far I thank God for linking me with you dear brethren and for giving me another chance to praise His word through good health.

'My children are very thankful for your support in their education and wellbeing.'

Sarah's business was affected by the Covid pandemic, but she said: *'I thank God there are still some reliable customers who still purchase, though in small quantities. It helps me with paying the government taxes and rental.'*

We first met Sarah just a few months after the armed raid on the church in Likoni. As well as losing her husband, Philip, an assistant pastor, she was injured in the attack, which claimed the lives of five other members of the congregation.



Pray for Pakistan family



Please continue to pray for Nabeela, Ashfaq and their daughter who featured in April's edition of *Voice*.

Ashfaq, who has been in prison in Pakistan for six years simply because of a false blasphemy allegation, was sentenced to death at a sessions court in Lahore in July.

Our partner recently met his wife, Nabeela (pictured), who told him she was very disappointed with the sentence and very discouraged. However, she appeared 'quite hopeful spiritually' and said she had left the matter in God's hands.

He said: *'She is very thankful to all those who are praying for her and supporting her in these difficult times.*

'She requested prayer especially for her little daughter who is always holding her grandfather's mobile phone so she can see her father's picture on it.'

Thankfully no one has been executed for blasphemy in Pakistan but those accused often end up languishing in prison for years waiting for their appeals to be heard.

• Please pray for justice for Ashfaq and that God will make a way for this family to be reunited.

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Release**



Listen to our latest podcasts



LIVING AMID HOSTILITY FOR JESUS Imtiaz Ashraf, who has visited Christians imprisoned for their faith in Pakistan, talks about some of the difficulties believers face, especially the pain of being behind bars separated from loved ones. He also shares some of the encouragements that he has seen in and through the lives of those suffering for Christ.

WALKING WITH THE PERSECUTED We are privileged to work with extremely dedicated and courageous partners across the world. So it is a special privilege for us when they are able to visit the UK. Hear Release International's James Fraser talk about the forthcoming UK speaker tour by international partner Bob Fu of ChinaAid. Listen in as we hear Bob's story of faith and imprisonment in China and what we can look forward to hearing during his visit in October this year. Plus Bob recounts the opposition and threats he and his family faced in Texas in 2020.

I FOCUS MY EYES ON JESUS Over the past year Artless Theatre Company has been touring its production of *If Prison Walls Could Speak*. This is a powerful play that presents the true story of Release International's associate ministry worker Petr Jasek who was arrested and imprisoned for his faith in Sudan. Petr talks about how it felt to see his story re-enacted and shares some of his experiences meeting persecuted Christians in Africa.

Nigeria's Christians continue to suffer

Islamic terrorists in southern Nigeria were reported to have kidnapped four nuns in August, three days after suspected Fulani herdsmen shot dead a Christian lawyer in the country's northwest, sources said.

Benedict Azza, director of the legal department of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in Zamfara state, was killed when gunmen raided his home in Gussau, the state capital, residents said.

A text message received by Morning Star News asserted that the gunmen were militant Fulani herdsmen and that Benedict's body had been abandoned by the roadside.

Islamist terrorists in northern Nigeria were also suspected of killing an 86-year-old Christian, Daniel Yatai, in his home in Kaduna state earlier in the month as well as kidnapping two others who were later released, most likely after ransom payments were made.

• **A Christian woman who was cleaning her church building was shot dead by suspected Fulani militants in Plateau state in August, sources said.**

Lyop Dalyop was sweeping and cleaning the Church of Christ in Nations building in Bangai village, Riyom County, when she was attacked by 'armed men suspected to be Fulani militias', said an attorney who serves as the director of Emancipation Centre for Crisis Victims in Nigeria.



Iranian couple detained

Iranian Christians request prayer for Homayoun Zhavah and his wife Sara Ahmadi (pictured) who have been detained in Evin Prison in Tehran.

Initially arrested in June 2019, Homayoun was released after a month, but Sara spent 67 days in detention – half in solitary confinement where she endured extreme psychological pressure.

In November 2020 Sara was sentenced to 11 years in prison for her alleged role in leading a house church (later reduced to eight years) and Homayoun to two years for house church membership.

The couple expected to start their sentences in June 2021 but when they presented themselves at Evin they were told they could return home for the time being.

On August 13, this year, they were detained after answering a summons to the prison.

Friends are concerned about their well-being, especially as Homayoun suffers from advanced Parkinson's disease.



Remember Gao, urges partner

Our partner ChinaAid has appealed for prayer for Christian lawyer Gao Zhisheng (pictured) who remains in secret detention in China. Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his human rights work, he has been repeatedly held in detention and tortured.

Gao, who began his practice in 1996, was first arrested after defending marginalised groups such as Christians. He was released from prison in 2014, but authorities continued to monitor him and deny him medical treatment. In August 2017 he escaped house arrest and headed to Shanxi with the help of two friends; however, he was arrested after 23 days in hiding and remains in secret detention. There has been no information on his current condition.

'We must not forget prisoners such as Gao,' said Paul Robinson, Release International CEO. 'They might not be in the news but they are being treated appallingly; they are still suffering and they still need our prayers!'

Looking the tiger in the eye, page 6



HELPING
PRISONERS
OF FAITH

LOOKING THE TIGER IN THE EYE

told Release International in a recent interview. *'They forced the local school to bar my children so they could not get an education and we were forced to move home several times under pressure from the authorities.'*

Thankfully Chen made contact with our partners, ChinaAid, who were able to advise him about leaving the country before it was too late.

Chen, who represented leading human rights lawyers Xie Yang and Jiang Tianyong, had come to faith in Christ a few years earlier. This newfound belief informed and inspired his work and he sees God's hand in all he went through.

'The scripture that helped me the most during those difficult days was Psalm 23,' he said.



Christians are widely represented among the lawyers who are paying a heavy price for representing those accused of 'state subversion' – a catch-all charge used to target anyone the authorities believe is challenging the state's authority such as church leaders.

Two weeks after being warned that he would be forcibly disappeared Chen and his family were able to escape China by fleeing to Myanmar.

Similarly accused was Peter Li, a former judge who ended up in prison for 14 years simply for trying to help provide justice for the poor.

Peter was brought up in a Christian family but it was only while in prison that his faith took on a greater depth

and he was instrumental in leading some 50 prisoners to faith in Christ. Among them was an underworld gang boss who became a close friend.

In Chinese prisons all religious materials are allowed except for Bibles, so the scriptures are treasured by believers and kept away from the eyes of the guards.

During his time behind bars Peter saved up enough money to bribe a worker who was able to source a Bible for him. The book became treasured by the Christian prisoners and had to be hidden.

'One day,' said Peter, 'the guards found our Bible and tried to take it from us but my close friend, the former gangster, refused to hand it over. They then beat him to death.'

Peter showed me a photograph of the man's battered corpse. *'He would not let the Bible go,'* he said, *'and paid for it with his life.'*

As with the lawyer Chen, Psalm 23 is also the treasured scripture of ethnic Kyrgyz Christian Ovalbek Turdakun, who spent ten months in a Chinese concentration camp in Xinjiang province.

As other prisoners sang communist songs to 're-educate' them under the watchful attention of the guards, Ovalbek took the opportunity to worship Jesus, reciting the psalm out loud and singing 'Hallelujah!'. At shower time he used the noise of the water to drown out his voice from the microphones so that he could share the gospel with the inmates beside him.

He testifies to the presence of God throughout his detention in 2018, despite torture and being kept under constant surveillance. Cameras on walls allowed guards constantly to monitor the prisoners. *'I did not feel alone; I knew God was with me. I did not suffer the same ill-effects on my health as badly as other prisoners.'*

Ovalbek, like his cellmates, was forcibly injected with various treatments purportedly vaccines but which caused debilitating side-effects such as pain in their ears, hands and feet, and trouble walking.

He was also tied into the 'tiger chair', a piece of steel furniture used to punish prisoners, so-called because if they moved the restraints would tighten up or 'bite back'.

Amazingly, although the other prisoners were allowed only one

'God never forsook me; He was with me throughout it all'

20-minute visit from family a month, Ovalbek was granted two-hour visits every week!

'My family were also allowed to bring in meals for me whereas normally you weren't allowed to bring in even a sunflower seed. God turned the impossible to the possible. These were things I had heard about before but now I experienced them for myself.'

Not only that but contrary to all known practice the Government actually supplied his family (wife Zhyldyz and son Daniyel) with food during the time that he was in prison. When Joseph returned home he was overwhelmed to see all the supplies that had been provided by both relatives and officials. It was a miracle and an answer to prayer. Ovalbek, like other prisoners, had feared that his family would starve because there is no support for the families of those who are put in state camps.

'Being in the camp strengthened my faith,' he told Release. *'I was there for ten months and then eight months under house arrest. After that eight months we finished the food but then God made a way for us to leave the country.'*

He added: *'God never forsook me; He was with me throughout it all. I am grateful to China Aid, Release International's partner, for helping me and my family to get out.'*

After being granted 'humanitarian status' by the US, Ovalbek, who holds no bitterness or unforgiveness towards the Chinese authorities, described his experiences in the camp at the International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington DC in June.

A Christian lawyer who has suffered the wrath of the Chinese state for his

Continued overleaf...



Ovalbek Turdakun with wife Zhyldyz and son Daniyel

activities representing persecuted Christians and other minorities is Jiang Tianyong. We spoke to his wife Bianling Jin, who told us how her husband was tied in a marble 'tiger' chair for 24 hours in a detention centre.

'It had such an impact on his body that there are things he can no longer physically do,' she said.

Jiang who is still in China, confined to his home because of Covid restrictions, was beaten by the police in 2014 as a result of his human rights work, suffering eight broken ribs. Two years later he disappeared for a couple of months and was then sentenced to two years in prison. On his release he was put under house arrest for a further three years and deprived of his political rights.

'We have been separated for nine years now,' Jin told us. 'Every day I pray for my husband and his health. Please pray with us that he can leave China

and that we can be reunited.'

Despite the deteriorating situation inside the country, our partner Bob Fu, founder and president of ChinaAid, which supports persecuted believers, is optimistic for the future of the church, and by extension, the nation itself. *'Persecution is not a new thing. I think God will use this new wave of persecution to revive the church. One study by a university in the US concluded that there are 100 million to 130 million Christians in China already and estimates that by 2030 there will be 224 million, based on a lesser degree of persecution.*

Fastest growth is when persecution is worse so from that perspective we can say that President Xi Jinping is in fact a faithful servant of God!'

If Bob is right, then given the intensification of persecution under President Xi Jinping, it looks like the church in China is on course for a period of significant growth!

Camps, 'Nazification' and total loyalty

According to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda, they are known as 'vocational training centres' – as if their purpose is job reskilling. These camps are predominantly sited in Xinjiang province and the Uyghur Autonomous Region.

'The CCP propaganda makes these camps out to be about "de-extremisation" or mind transformation,' said Bob Fu of ChinaAid. 'In essence if you do not see the CCP as your saviour then you are branded an extremist.'

As part of its attempt to control all aspects of life, the CCP is ruthlessly

pursuing a policy of 'sinicisation' – forcing Christians to make their faith compatible with communist ideology.

'There was a time when the state church was allowed to function and generally only the unregistered house churches were targeted by the authorities but now Xi makes no distinction,' said Bob.

'He is only interested in total loyalty to the CCP and to himself so under Xi the state's Three Self Patriotic (TSP) churches have been shut down in the name of sinicisation, which at least has meant the TSP congregations have joined the house church movement! As a church leader if you are only 70 to 80 per cent loyal, then you are done for. Churches were closed during the Covid lockdown regime, so now you need a legitimate reason to re-open and unless you match the criteria of the CCP for clergy you will be removed from your position.'

In order to re-open, churches are required to install face-recognition cameras from the pulpit to the four corners of the church building. This is so that no one under the age of 18, party members, CCP youth members, civil servants or military personnel attends.

Churches that incorporate these stringent measures and are allowed to open then have to demonstrate their total loyalty, eg, their teaching must be completely compatible with communist ideology.

Bob said: *'The CCP must be praised. Portraits of Chairman Mao and President Xi are displayed on the pulpit either side of the cross. Communist party anthems have to be sung before the doxology can be said. It is just like the nazification of Germany in the 1930s when churches were forced to praise "the great leader"'*

Unsurprisingly interaction with foreigners, unless explicitly approved at provincial level, can result in accusations of 'subversion of state power'.

'Several Christians have been jailed for legally travelling to Kuala Lumpur for a Bible conference where an Indonesian was the key speaker two years ago. The charge was made

Continued overleaf..



SKY'S THE LIMIT

I've just finished interviewing Christian lawyer Chen Jiangang and we move outside to take some photos in the afternoon Texan sun. It's topping 100 degrees and we don't want to stay out too long but just as we are about to take his picture Chen stretches out his arms and lifts them up to the blue skies in thanks to God for his freedom.

It's hard to appreciate just how much it means for someone who has spent so much time under constant surveillance, never knowing when the police will stop you and take you in for questioning for no justifiable reason.

'The communist party has ruined China. Even the sky is a terrible colour because of their policy that has led to pollution,' he declares.

You realise it is the perfect metaphor for the way the Chinese Communist Party is poisoning the nation and its people. Even the air is toxic.

But thank God that that's not the end of the story for China, or the church in this communist nation. The worse the persecution, it seems, the more people are turning in faith to Christ. If current trends continue, says ChinaAid, by the end of the decade China will become 'the largest Christian country'!

That's a staggering thought. If that proves accurate then it puts in a whole new light the quote often attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte and generally viewed in terms of economic and military might: 'Let China sleep, for when she wakes, she will shake the world'. Just think what a China awakened to the truth of the gospel could do!

Tom Hardie

retrospectively and they are still being held,' said Bob.

The printing of scripture is also now illegal unless authorised by the Government. *'One Christian couple were sentenced to 12 years' detention for printing Bibles.'*

Targeted prayers

'We need to pray more earnestly and with targeted prayers,' said Bob.

'The CCP want to target children and the availability of the Bible. All Bible apps have been taken down and in the past few years millions of Christian children have been ordered to renounce their faith in front of their class or school and even with police in attendance. Parents are coerced and

action is taken against them if they don't agree.

'We need to equip the children so they can get the word of God.'

He said teachers, doctors and nurses were forbidden from practising their faith.

'Pray for those in prison too, Christians such as John Cao, whose only crime was managing schools, and Wang Yi of Early Rain Covenant Church, who was given a nine-year sentence for a sermon on John 3:16 and urging President Xi to repent and turn to Christ. Six hundred members of the church have suffered arrest and some elders are still in prison.

'We must remember and pray for them.'



LATEST PODCAST

Hear Bob Fu discuss his forthcoming speaker tour to the UK; his own story of faith and imprisonment in China and the opposition and threats he and his family faced more recently in Texas (see page 5 for more podcast details and page 21 for tour information).

Stock photo



THE 709 CRACKDOWN

On July 9, 2015, and in the days following, 200 lawyers and human rights activists – a significant number of them Christian – were rounded up. They were tortured and their families were persecuted and from that point on almost all human rights lawyers in China have been disbarred.



PLEASE HELP CHRISTIAN PRISONERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Release International helps Christian prisoners of faith and their families around the world in the name of Jesus.

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- Enable families to visit their loved ones in prison
- Provide legal and other assistance

To make a gift please use the enclosed form, call 01689 823491 or give online at releaseinternational.org

NORTH KOREA



'Let us worship God'

Stock photo / Thomas Evans



Mr C used to think that underground Christians were crazy. Now he is moved to repentance by their great faith

*Hassan John
has known
God's protection
on numerous
occasions*

What hope for the church in northern Nigeria?

by the Christian south grew and some sought solutions in military coups. But this simply deepened the religious divide and in 1967 a three-year war broke out that killed about a million southern Igbo Christians. You will know it as the Biafra war. In many ways, the country never healed from that war.

Years of military dictatorship suppressed religious outbursts – although not without incidents like the Maitatsine religious riots in the 1980s and the killings and beheadings of Christians in Kano, Kaduna and Zaria, on accusations of blasphemies or insulting the Koran or the Prophet Mohammed.

As you say, things have got far worse with the violence perpetrated by radical Islamist groups in northern Nigeria. The terrorist Islamist sect, *Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād* (People of Islamic



Boko Haram was designated the deadliest terrorist organisation in the world in 2018

preaching and Jihad), popularly called *Boko Haram*, are not the only radical Islamist sect in the country. There are at least six different sects currently, according to Nigeria's security agencies. These include Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) al-Qaeda, Fulani Islamist militia groups and *Sara Suka* among others. Boko Haram copied the Islamist terrorist group ISIL, using social media for its propaganda and its attack on the United Nations building in Abuja, Nigeria, as well as its abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls, which raised its profile on the international stage. The Global Terrorism Index named Boko Haram the deadliest terrorist organisation in the world in 2018.

Boko Haram's declared mission statement, in its very first propaganda video in 2010, was to attack and kill Christians and destroy anything that it deems as 'western', that is, democracy and 'western education' introduced by Christian missionaries in Nigeria.

The radical Fulani Islamist militia are affiliated to Boko Haram and its ideology and have targeted Christian villages in central Nigeria. The group,

said to be the fourth deadliest group, according to the Global Terrorism Index, has killed over 3,000 people between January and June this year. It has destroyed over 300 villages in Southern Kaduna, Plateau, Benue and Taraba states and displaced more than 1.3 million people.

More recently, the Ansaru Islamic terrorist group has been active in the Sahel region together with al-Qaeda in the Maghreb. This group has been operating in communities and villages in southern Kaduna state, killing, raping and kidnapping for ransom.

It is now clear that the Nigerian Government lacks the political will and the security forces have been weakened by both political compromises and corruption among senior ranking officers, who, as Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) has pointed out, were mostly promoted and positioned based on religious affiliation. The Army has proven its lack of capacity to effectively and professionally execute its duty to defend Nigeria's citizens.

Analysts have repeatedly said that

Nigeria is fast drifting into a failed state. The growing anarchy, the high level of insecurity and the inability of the Government to provide social and economic security to its citizens have generated speculation that Nigeria, in its current state, will not survive for long as a united entity. Another civil war could destabilise the whole West Africa region but impact the wider world, particularly Europe, with an influx of refugees.

In terms of persecution, the biggest concern is whether the churches in northern Nigeria can survive another decade of this intense violence. Currently over 3,000 churches have been destroyed in northern Nigeria, according to CAN.

Pastors have been targeted and killed and worship services have been attacked by gunmen. Christian schools have been attacked and many forced to close. Analysts estimate that over three million children have been forced out of school by these attacks. The persecution has risen to a genocidal level which, unfortunately, the international community has chosen to ignore.

Continued overleaf...



Release International-funded training has revitalised hope for pastoral ministry despite the intense persecution

and against advice – we went by a different route (deemed more dangerous). The next day, after our meeting with pastors, we were stopped by people blocking the road. We could see smoke rising from a burning village. We were relieved to discover that the men were a combined force of soldiers and civilian task force, returning from engaging Boko Haram the previous evening. It turned out that had we taken the recommended route we would have met Boko Haram! Our testimonies of what the Lord has done are many.

It is a traumatic experience constantly meeting people whose family members have been killed, praying at countless mass graves almost every week, and meeting and praying with victims who have lost limbs or have life-changing wounds from a senseless attack. It is difficult all the time. I always pray

for strength; for the Lord to give me words of comfort and the wisdom to say what will bring healing and to be able to plead for love for those who hate us rather than carrying hatred and seeking vengeance. It is tough.

Q: In recent times you have been involved in training church leaders and evangelists to strategically take the gospel into some of the most dangerous areas in Nigeria. What can you tell us about that, and about how the work is progressing?

This is an exciting aspect of what the Lord is doing among pastors in Borno state.

With the support and funding of Release International, I train pastors from many rural communities who have suffered attacks by Boko Haram or Fulani Islamist militia groups. We give training in Christian apologetics,

'Many pastors had fled the attacks while those who remained in their communities were frustrated with the ceaseless killings'

on how to answer the question of 'God and suffering', 'God's judgement' and 'How to answer Islam'. We started with over 250 pastors out of the huge number impacted by Boko Haram attacks in Borno state. One of the pastors had lived in a refugee camp in Maiduguri (Borno's state capital) for over five years in one little tent with five members of his family. Many pastors had fled the attacks while those who remained in their communities were frustrated with the ceaseless killings and the overwhelming challenges of caring for people, with little or no resources.

The training has had a tremendous impact in terms of revitalising hope for pastoral ministry, focusing on God's divine grace and provision despite the intense persecution. I remember one pastor saying: *'Thank you for reigniting the fire in our ministries. I can now confidently*

explain to any of my members why these tragedies continue to happen and how God is with us even in our sufferings.' Another said, *'The Lord had guided you here to bring hope and to tell us emphatically that He has not abandoned us.'* The training has expanded to southern Kaduna, Plateau state and to Abuja, the capital. We now have over 700 pastors on the programme.

In Borno state we all agreed that as pastors we are all called to live and die for Christ. We set up mission teams to go back into the communities that were still under Boko Haram control and to evangelise. Our mission was to simply bring the good news and show the love of Christ. I will not go into details of places and what we did but would simply say that the Lord has been amazingly faithful. We currently have nearly 200 Muslim converts. The work is still ongoing and we are raising up disciples among our converts who, at the right time, will be our missionaries to their communities.

At some point, we suspect that Boko Haram realised something was going on as they began stopping commercial vehicles, identifying if someone was a Christian (by their ID cards or ATM cards). They let Muslims go but executed Christians on the spot or took them captive for ransom. Despite this the work continues, with amazing results. Muslims in many of these communities are increasingly asking for Bibles and we are now organising what we call 'shadow discipleship groups'.

Q: How has Release International support for this work been helping you?

Without Release International none of these Muslims who have come to Christ through our mission teams would have had the opportunity to experience God's love and His saving grace and liberty. Release International provided the funding, the encouragement and, very critically, the mobilisation for prayer and protection for our team and for

Stock photo



Christians on a prayer march against the violence

the Christians suffering violence in Nigeria generally.

All the pastors who have committed to take the risks and continue evangelising would not have been able to do that without the training and the careful, strategic planning. I also appreciate the love that has been expressed by Christians sending postcards at Easter and Christmas to encourage pastors and their families. One church member, when she got a Christmas card, said (with a smile on her face): *'I feel the love of brethren from abroad. I praise God for all brothers and sisters praying for us.'* The confidence pastors have here is that Release International and its supporters are like the hands of Aaron and Hur holding up the hands of Moses in the battlefield as souls are won for Christ.

Q: How would you want Christians in the UK to be praying for Nigeria and for its Christian communities at this time?

We are clear in our minds that the enemy of our soul, the devil, is using every means to quench the love of Christ in our hearts, to discourage those who may be attracted to the warmth of Christ and to bring pain, anguish and death in Christian communities in Nigeria. But we are confident in this, that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. We therefore ask Christians in the UK not to relent in praying for Christians in northern Nigeria. We are standing firm here held up and supported by your prayers.

ERITREA

ERITREA STEPS UP ARRESTS



Helen Berhane's
inspiring testimony
is available at
releaseinternational.org

'Food and medicine have been getting through since June but all forces are preparing for further conflict. Eritrea is sending more forces into Tigray and the Ethiopian Government is also saying it will reinvade Tigray.'

Hundreds of Christians who fled to northern Ethiopia to escape persecution in Eritrea have been caught up in the conflict.

**Song of the Nightingale* is available for £8 from the releaseinternational.org estore



PRAY

- Thank God that Christianity continues to grow in Eritrea
- Pray for all those who have recently been arrested and for those who have been behind bars for many years. Ask God to comfort them and their families and to make a way for their release
- Thank God that food and medicine have got through to those in need in the Tigray region
- Pray for an end to the fighting in Tigray

SRI LANKA



Sri Lankans demonstrate over government failures

New challenge for island's believers

DECREE WITH NO LEGAL BASIS

Sri Lankan law does not require Protestant places of worship or religious bodies to register with the State. However, in October 2008, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Moral Upliftment (also known as the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs) issued a circular requesting all future construction of any place of worship to seek prior permission from the ministry.

The ministry instructed provincial councils and divisional secretariats to comply with this requirement and seek its prior approval before approving applications. Ministry and local government officials make decisions to grant or deny permission based on their own understanding or biases even though this circular has no founding in parliamentary legislation and so no legal validity.

Several Right to Information requests to the ministry and the Department of Christian Affairs have received responses definitively stating that the circular is applicable only to Buddhist places of worship. These responses have further reiterated that currently there is no registration process in place for Protestant places of worship or clergy.

However, local government authorities and law enforcement officials continue to use the 2008 circular to curtail the rights of religious minorities and subject them to harassment.

PRAY FOR SRI LANKA

- Pray that Christians in Sri Lanka will know God's provision and care
- For wisdom and protection for Release International partners
- That the 2008 circular would be repealed

Iranian Christian denied parole



Pleas for parole by Naser Navard Gol-Tapeh have been consistently rejected

An Iranian Christian prisoner of faith has been denied parole for a fifth time, reports Release International partner Article 18.

Naser Navard Gol-Tapeh, who celebrated his 60th birthday on August 3, has been in Evin prison since January 2018, serving a 10-year sentence for 'acting against national security by establishing house churches'.

Naser was arrested in 2016 when intelligence police agents raided an engagement party at a house in Karaj near Tehran. Everyone present was detained, including three visiting Christians from Azerbaijan. Most were released after questioning and collection of their personal information, but Naser and the Azeris were transferred to Evin. Some sources suggested that Naser was not released as he was older than the others in the group and was perceived as the leader.

The four Christians were held in solitary confinement for two months and subjected to intense interrogation. During this time, they were denied consular assistance and legal counsel. They were all charged with 'illegal gathering, collusion and evangelism'. In October 2016 they were temporarily released on bail equivalent to approximately £25,500 each. The three Azeris – Bahram Nasibov, Yusif Farhadov and Eldar Gurbanov – were allowed to leave Iran the next month, forfeiting their bail.

Naser is eligible for release on parole, having served well over a third of his sentence, but all requests for either parole or a reduction in his sentence have been denied.

His lawyer, Iman Soleimani, says he has been told that Naser is being held as a 'deterrent' to other Christians, and that it is believed that to release him ahead of time would send out the wrong message.

Naser has suffered several health issues during his incarceration and was recently sent for an MRI scan after losing hearing in his left ear, which also affected his balance and led to a number of falls.

His elderly mother recorded an emotional plea on video a year ago for

'He has done nothing; he only became a Christian'

her son, who is her primary carer, to be returned to her side, but he remains in prison.

Nasser has appealed for a retrial on three occasions, but each time his request has been denied.

Having been led to believe he would be granted parole, he had encouraged his mother he would soon be able to return to her. But their wait to be reunited goes on.

On his 60th birthday, his mother called for her son's release, saying: *'He has done nothing; he only became a Christian.'*

During his imprisonment, Naser has written several open letters querying why belonging to a house church was deemed an 'action against national security'.

'Is the fellowship of a few Christian brothers and sisters in someone's home, singing worship songs, reading the Bible and worshipping God acting against national security?' he asked in one letter.

As a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Iran has a binding obligation to respect and protect the right to religious freedom, including the freedom to choose or to change one's beliefs.

• Please pray for Naser's release and that he will be able to be reunited with his elderly mother



Find out about other prisoners of faith and how you can help them on our website: releaseinternational.org/prisoners-of-faith

VOLUNTEERING



Christine and Steve's Re-Loved Jewellery has been raising funds for persecuted Christians for ten years

'Looking back, it has been such a joy and privilege to be able to raise funds in this way. We are looking forward to what the Lord has in store for Re-Loved Jewellery!'

She added: 'We would love to partner with others and send them some of the jewellery for them to sell to raise funds. We can even share our knowledge and experience with them.'

When we hear stories of others fundraising, it can be quite daunting. We think about all of the things we cannot do, like a bike pilgrimage or a long hike. Or we might think that we could never raise £10,000. So the question is: how can we get involved?

Imtiaz continues: *'One story that inspired me was of a 12-year-old boy. In 2019 he decided to bake a cake and sell slices to raise funds. He managed to raise £50. He has since gone on to bake more and raise more funds. He didn't let his age stop him. He started where he was at. What could he do? He could bake!'*

'So the question is: what are you good at? For some people it might be painting, for others it could be knitting. We need to start where we are and think creatively about how we can use the talents God has given us to further His kingdom.'

To help you get started, we have two fundraising guides. One of them focuses on the online format: things you can do from the comfort of your own home. The other has ideas that will take you out and about. Both of these can be found on our website: www.releaseinternational.org/resources-downloads. But don't be constrained by these ideas. You may have a God-given skill or interest that is just ideal for fundraising.

We would love to hear from you and support you in this key role. If you are interested in becoming a Volunteer Fundraiser, or supporting Christine with selling Re-Loved Jewellery, then please email volunteer@releaseinternational.org or call us on 01689 823491.

10,000 reasons (to be a fundraiser!)

Volunteer fundraisers are an inspiring part of Release International's UK ministry. *'They amaze and encourage me with their tireless efforts to fundraise for our persecuted brothers and sisters, and they make a real contribution to the lives of our partners and those they serve,'* said our Volunteering Ambassador Imtiaz.

You may well have read about volunteer Robert de Berry, a retired vicar, and his team who cycled earlier this year from North Foreland Point Lighthouse in Kent to Land's End and back again to raise vital funds for our persecuted family. It was a 900-mile journey that many individuals and

churches supported. You can read more about their amazing ride on page 20.

Another of our volunteers, Christine Disney, shares her story:

'My husband, Steve, who is also a volunteer, and I sort, clean and sell all kinds of second-hand jewellery with all proceeds going towards the vital work of Release International.'

'Re-Loved Jewellery was launched in 2012. Since then, we have been able to raise over £10,000 for our persecuted brothers and sisters. Some of this has been due to the amazing support of other supporters who regularly make donations of jewellery.'

For such a time as this

'If it pleases the king,' she said, 'and if he regards me with favour and thinks it the right thing to do, and if he is pleased with me, let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, devised and wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king's provinces. For how can I bear to see disaster fall on my people? How can I bear to see the destruction of my family?'

(Esther 8: v5-7)

Release International was delighted to be part of the Robert de Berry bike pilgrimage this year, which reached its conclusion by the beach at Margate at the end of June.

Paul Robinson, CEO, joined Robert and the bike pilgrims for their last event, which was held at St Philip's Church, Palm Bay. All the riders were presented with a thank-you Bible – the recently published Voice of the Martyrs' New Living Translation edition titled *One Year Pray for the Persecuted*.

This fantastic volunteer-led fundraiser has now raised more than £80,000 to date and we are keeping the fund open for gifts until the first week in October. So if you would like to give to



the bike pilgrims for their wonderful 900-mile cross-country ride, there is still time to do so via our website.

Laura Hayes, Release International's Director of UK Engagement, said: 'It was such a joy to spend some time with our bike pilgrims. I joined the team in Truro in Cornwall and toured with them in support to St Austell, Plymouth and Exeter, meeting some of the day riders too. I want to send my deepest thanks to Robert, Paul, Karien, Roger and Simon, who all cycled the whole ride. They trained so hard and gave up their time to raise the voice of our brothers and sisters who suffer for Christ.'

Amazing experience

Karien said: 'The ride was an amazing experience, and the very best of it was when we met with the volunteer hosts who put us up in their homes every night. I met the most amazing Christians on the route. It was so generous of them to open up their homes and provide us with dinner and breakfast – we were complete strangers but we have made

lifelong friends. It made all the difference, after a really long, hard day cycling – sometimes over 50 miles. Without them we would have been totally exhausted. They prayed with us and sustained us. Thank you to so many supporters who allowed us to share with them.'

We also want to thank the 82 day riders who joined the ride for a one-off stage.

Laura added: 'We were so deeply thankful to God for bringing us so many enthusiastic cyclists. We had no idea how many people would take up the challenge, but we were so grateful for every one. We also thank the brilliant drivers, who made sure that all the luggage was picked up and delivered every day. Many Release volunteers attended the church services to help with the bookstall. You were essential to the smooth running of the event too. God bless you all.'

She concluded: 'Finally I would like to say a big thank you to all the church leaders who hosted us in their churches. We visited over 40 churches, and we made so many new friends at every event. Many of the church events were supported by Release International speakers and I particularly want to thank Paul Thomas, Colin King, Andrew Wilmshurst and Imtiaz Ashraf who delivered such wonderful Bible talks along the way. One of the talks was about Esther and how she realised, almost too late, that her first duty was to protect her faith family from persecution and intercede. We are all called, like Esther, to raise the voice of persecuted Christians for the sake of the Kingdom. How can we bear to see the destruction of our own family in Christ?'

The *One Year Pray for the Persecuted Bible* is available for £13 from the releaseinternational.org estore.



SUNDAE SERVICE

An encounter with Richard and Sabina Wurmbrand 43 years ago left an impression on Paul and Carol Trezise (pictured) that continues today.

The Romanian pastor and his wife, who inspired the founding of Release International, stayed at the couple's home in Hull when they were visiting the area to speak at an event and on a local radio station.

Since then Paul and Carol have prayed for and practically supported persecuted

Christians, initially by collecting clothes which were taken to Christians in communist countries.

The couple now live in South Wales and have continued to support persecuted believers by fundraising at their church. With their fellowship's support they sell ice-cream after Sunday services in the summer months and hot drinks in the winter.

In total the couple have raised around £2,500 while enjoying a few ice creams along the way!



Special UK tour by China partner

We are delighted that Release International partner and leading advocate for the oppressed in China Dr Bob Fu will be visiting the UK for a special speaker tour this autumn.

Bob will be explaining the current situation for Christians in China and how believers are being affected by new forms of oppression. He will also be sharing how God is moving in the midst of persecution and how your support is helping our brothers and sisters in China to persevere.

Bob, the founder and president of ChinaAid, regularly briefs the US State Department and Members of Congress on the status of religious freedom in China, and in 2020 was honoured with the Wilberforce Award from the Colson Centre, an award

which recognises Christian leaders who encourage all Christians to make a difference in the face of tough societal problems and injustices.

Please join us for what promises to be an inspiring week-long series of meetings.

Bob will be speaking at the following venues:

**Friday 30 September | 7.30pm |
Sutton Baptist Church, SM1 1SN**

**Saturday 01 October | 7.30pm |
Orpington Baptist Church, BR6 0RZ**

**Monday 03 October | 7.30pm |
Carlisle Christian Fellowship,
CA2 5BT**

**Tuesday 04 October | 7.30pm |
Hamilton Baptist Church, ML3 6QL**

**Wednesday 05 October | 7.30pm |
New Testament Pentecostal Church,
Ballynahinch, BT24 8DN**

**Thursday 06 October | 7.30pm |
St Paul's, Camberley, GU15 2AD**

If you are unable to attend in person but would like to hear Bob please join us for an online event with Bob for all regions of the UK on Friday, October 7, at 7:30pm.

See our website releaseinternational.org for more information.



'The most haunting yet the most beautiful thing I've ever heard or seen'

New dates have been confirmed for the Artless Theatre Company's powerful stage production of *If Prison Walls Could Speak*, the true story of one Christian's experience in a brutal Sudanese prison.

Release international partner Petr Jasek was imprisoned as a result of his ministry to persecuted Christians in 2015.

This one-man play based on the time he spent behind bars sharing a cell with ISIS fighters is a hybrid multimedia performance, which features immersive video and sound.

Here are just a few comments from those who have seen the production:

'Very moving. An incredible story that lots of people ought to hear.'

'The most harrowing, the most haunting and yet the most beautiful thing I've ever heard or seen. As a former prisoner to see what that guy went through, for Christ, I will never forget that story.'

'I really enjoyed the production. It was very thought-provoking and very emotional and made me think more about the persecuted church and what they suffer.'

For tour dates near you check out releaseinternational.org/artless-theatre-tour.

Petr's story *Imprisoned with ISIS* is available from the releaseinternational.org estore or by calling 01689 823491.



INVITE A SPEAKER

Our team of experienced speakers are available to join your church or online meeting to help you support and pray for persecuted Christians. They would love to hear from you!

Ireland:

Stephen on 028 9334 0014
or 07933 313169

London & South:

James on 07434 894016

Midlands & North:

Allister on 07916 396178

Scotland:

James on 07434 894016

Wales & West of England:

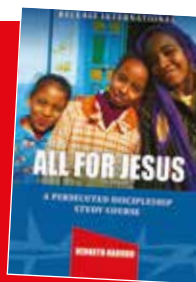
Paul on 07861 651139

All for Jesus

Our study course *All for Jesus* is a small group Bible study series

that enables us to get to grips with Christian discipleship in a world that is hostile to Jesus. The five studies have been written by Release International's Kenneth Harrod. Each study focuses on a passage of Scripture, with introductory notes and questions. There are helpful notes for group leaders at the back.

The publication is available from the store on our website, releaseinternational.org, priced at £4 for one copy OR a special homegroup price of £9 for ten copies (both prices include P&P).



Fighting the good fight

filled with joy, singing praises to God in prison.

On another occasion, knowing his life was soon coming to an end, Paul in prison writes to Timothy to encourage him to remain strong in his faith and be willing to suffer for the gospel. Although Paul may have felt lonely and

‘Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord’

abandoned, his words to Timothy are not of a discouraged or a fearful man. They are words of a man who did not view his execution as a tragedy, or a life being taken away.

He saw his life as an offering and lived as a sacrifice to God and now he was ready to depart this world for his true home in heaven. As he looks back on his life he says with confidence: ‘I have

fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith’.

Although Paul is in prison, awaiting his death, he has no regrets. He knows he has faithfully completed the race God has set before him and has fought the good fight.

As we remember Christians in prison and their families, who also suffer in so many ways, let’s pray for them but also let’s learn from them. They know what it is to hold on to the promises of God, for example, that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8: 38,39).

If you have lost heart and are weary, like them fix your eyes on Jesus and remember that nothing can separate you from His love. He will carry you through life’s storms.

INSPIRING FAITH



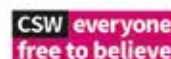
‘Christian love is always universal. With Christians there is no partiality. Jesus said that the sun of God rises over the good and the evil. The same is true about Christian love.’

Pastor Richard Wurmbrand was imprisoned for 14 years in communist Romania in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1968 he inspired the founding of Release International, which today continues his ministry to serve persecuted Christians around the world in the name of Jesus.



International Day of Prayer

Sunday 6 November
7:30pm



Prisoner focus to special day of intercession

prayer points, a PowerPoint presentation and song/hymn suggestions. You can find all of these at releaseinternational.org/idop.

Each year we have a particular focus for IDOP and this year our materials will be encouraging churches to think about and pray for Christians around the world who are in prison for their faith or face the constant threat of imprisonment for their gospel witness.

Do have a look at our IDOP page on the Release International website and feel free to download and use as many of these resources as you would like. You can do so on November 6, but, equally, you could choose another Sunday in November if it is more convenient. If you are not able to have a whole church service devoted to the persecution of Christians, why not ask your church leadership if you could have a slot in one of the services in November to do a short

presentation on the IDOP theme? Our resources would be ideal for this.

Secondly, in addition to producing materials that can be used in churches for IDOP Release International will once again be taking part in a special online event on November 6 at 7.30 pm.

In the past couple of years this event has been hosted by the Evangelical Alliance. Release International has contributed, along with Open Doors and CSW.

Release International CEO Paul Robinson will be speaking at this year's event. Paul will be introducing a short video which will highlight the difficult situation many Christians in China face as the communist authorities continue to crack down on believers in their attempt to bring religious groups under ever-tighter state control. (See our latest report on page 6 for more illustrations of the persecution Christians face in that country).

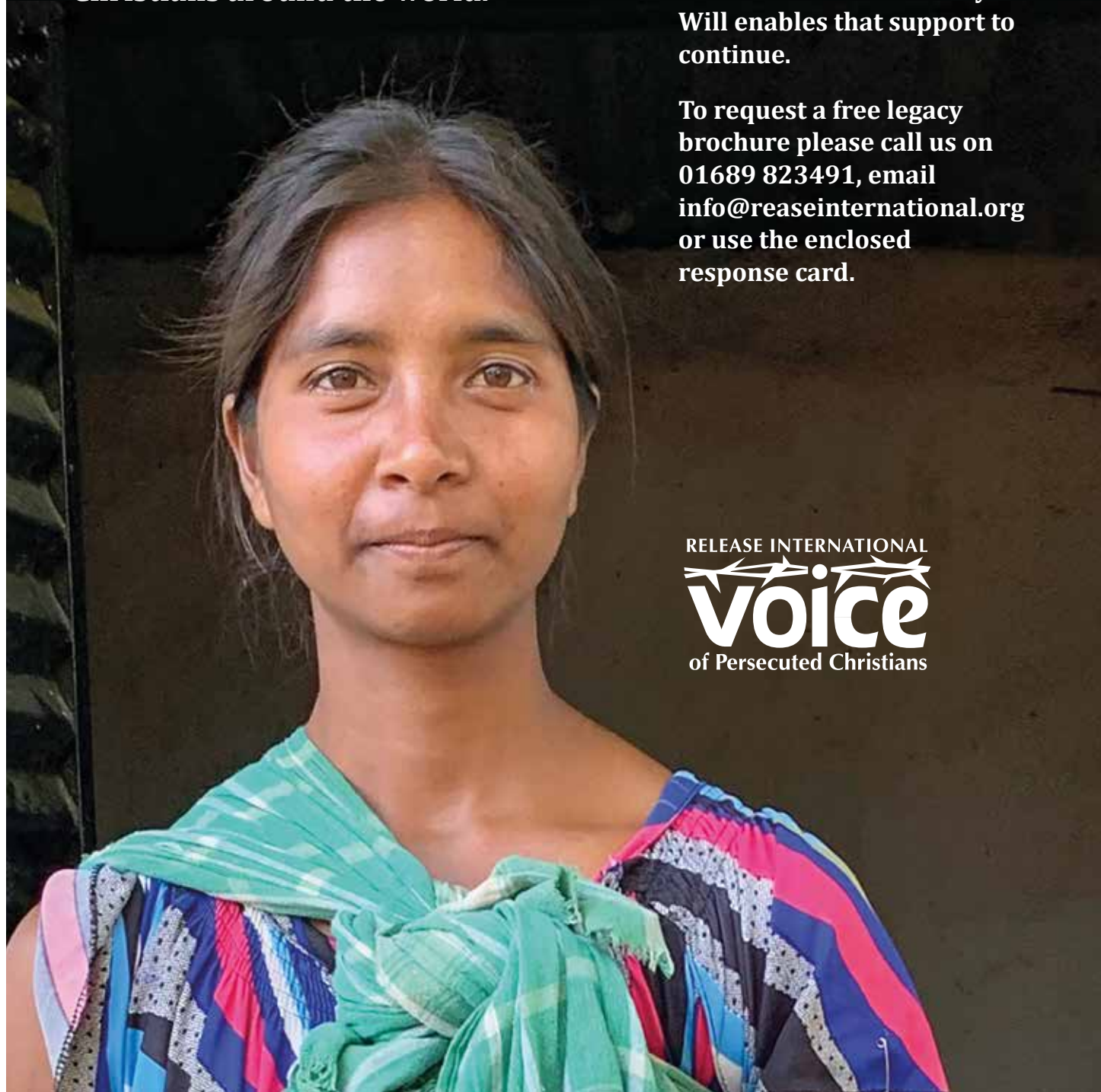
You can register to join the online event on Eventbrite (eventbrite.co.uk) by searching IDOP Online 2022, or on the Evangelical Alliance website (eauk.org).

Will you leave a legacy of enduring faith and love?

A legacy gift to Release International can be a natural continuation of your commitment to sharing God's love and compassion with persecuted Christians around the world.

Your support enables our partners to provide prayerful, pastoral and practical help to persecuted Christians in over 25 countries. Including a gift to Release International in your Will enables that support to continue.

To request a free legacy brochure please call us on 01689 823491, email info@releaseinternational.org or use the enclosed response card.



RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
Voice
of Persecuted Christians