

January 2013

International—It is only appropriate to begin the new year on a note of thanksgiving for the many ways the LORD has carried and sustained us throughout 2012, for the great patience and mercy He has shown a broken and unjust world, and for the deliverance, safety, and even freedom He has provided for many who face danger and imprisonment for pursuing what is right or for choosing to follow Him. We give thanks for the lives and work of all the following individuals, who were protected and/or freed in 2012 after being threatened or imprisoned: Uzbek pastor Makset Djabbarbergenov, Jenni Williams, founder of Women and Men of Zimbabwe Arise (Zimbabwe), human rights journalist Lydia Cacho (Mexico), student activist Jabbar Savalan (Azerbaijan), Christian human rights lawyer Chen Guangcheng (China), young Christian girl Rimsha Masih (Pakistan), Pastor Ilmurad Nurliev (Turkmenistan), Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani (Iran), and Mehdi “Petrou” Foroutan (Iran). As we are thankful for His provision, we also remember to persevere in prayer for these and others, as the trials they and those around them face are far from over—as the items below attest. (*Amnesty International; Voice of the Martyrs*)

China—The end of 2012 saw a large-scale leadership transition in the government of China. Originally set to take place in October, the 18th Party Congress was held in November, where seven new leaders of the Communist party, and therefore the country, were named. Most notably, Xi Jinping has replaced Hu Jintao as the President of China. Many around the world are watching and waiting to see if this handing over of power will lead to a more free and open society. At this time, the signals are mixed. President Xi has publicly denounced decades of corruption endemic in the political system, and yet the arrest and 12-year sentence handed down to Christian Li Bifeng just days after the congress seem to indicate the party holding to a hard line anti-Christian stance. Pray for China as a country during this tremendous transition, and pray that this may be an opportunity for greater reform and freedom. Pray for the protection and sustenance of those who fight for human rights and those who are persecuted for their faith. (*China Aid Association; The New York Times*)

Iran—Like many defending human rights in Iran, human right attorney Nasrin is now serving a 6-year sentence for her work. Additionally, her husband, 13-year-old daughter, and 5-year-old son have all faced harassment and restrictions, because of Nasrin's imprisonment. Her husband was even arrested, held in Evin prison, and blindfolded while being interrogated for writing a letter protesting his wife's harsh treatment. When it was discovered that Nasrin, using scraps of tissue, was writing her defense, face-to-face visits with her children were cutoff—and were only reinstated after Nasrin embarked on a 7-week hunger strike and international outcry. Pray for the protection and encouragement of this family and for the freedom of this brave defender of human rights. Pray that through this experience they might encounter the love and total freedom offered by Christ. Pray for Nasrin's legal work and for those whom she has and will, God-willing, defend against injustice and oppression in the future. (*Amnesty International*)

Nigeria—Lead contamination in the Nigerian state of Zamfara has caused the death of 400 children and disablement of thousands more. President Goodluck Jonathan has promised \$4 million to clean up this disaster, and yet neither the money nor the work has been forthcoming. Right now more than 1,500 children await urgent medical care, and thousands are at risk if this issue is not immediately addressed. Additionally, if the work is not begun in January, it will not be able to be completed before the rainy season. Yet President Goodluck Jonathan, who purports to be a Christian, has yet to release these promised funds. Pray for him to act with urgency and integrity. Pray for the families that lost innocent lives in this preventable disaster, and the many more who will suffer ongoing pain and struggle because of their exposure. Pray for the country so rich in resources, yet so riddled with poverty and strife. Pray

for peace between the Muslim and Christian communities, and for those who live in fear of attack and who grieve the loss of loved ones from violence and church bombings of previous months. (*Human Rights Watch*)

Undisclosed Middle Eastern Country—In early December, a meeting of African and Asian Christians in a private location was raided by an armed group of men. Forced to gather at one end of the building while their possessions and equipment—including musical instruments and Christian literature—were destroyed. Despite filing a complaint with the security forces, no formal action has been taken to address this violent attack or apprehend the perpetrators. Thankfully, no one was physically harmed, but these believers will certainly covet prayers for peace, confidence, and wisdom as they continue to meet, even while looking for a new location. Prayers specifically requested are as follows:

- a. Leaders and members of the fellowship will know the daily peace of Jesus, and His enabling to live without fear despite the threats
 - b. They will know the Spirit's guidance concerning the location and timing of future meetings
 - c. Similarly, that other expatriate Christians and local believers in the region will not be intimidated by these events but will know the Spirit's strength and guiding wisdom
 - d. The attackers would know the Spirit's conviction and seek the Father's forgiveness.”
- (*Source: Middle East Concern*)

Iran—Even as we gave thanks for the release of Youcef Nadarkhani and others in 2012, we are acutely reminded of the need to persevere in prayer and action on behalf of human rights and religious freedom, as Pastor Nadarkhani was re-arrested on Christmas Day, and is currently being held again in Evin Prison. Youcef has already spent nearly three years in prison, and recently faced the death penalty for his faith. Now his fate is uncertain again, and certainly his wife and two sons also need prayers for faith, peace, and protection in this ongoing struggle. Pray also for Youcef's lawyer, Mohammad Dadkhah, who is currently serving a 9-year sentence for his work defending Nadarkhani. Pray for this brave lawyer's freedom and for him to continue his vital work advocating for those persecuted unjustly in Iran. (*Multiple sources*)

North Korea—In her recent article in *The Wall Street Journal*, Melanie Kirkpatrick encourages us to “spare a thought on Christmas Eve for Christians who live in countries where practicing their faith is an act of courage. Nowhere is that more true than in North Korea, where religion is banned.” Indeed, North Korea needs our continued prayer throughout 2013, and beyond. This most repressive regime sees Christianity's focus on personal redemption and responsibility as dangerously opposed to the all-controlling aspirations of the government—and therefore, if discovered, Christians face immediate execution or life-long imprisonment under the harshest conditions as their certain fate. Kirkpatrick describes the North Korean church as so clandestine and tenuous that “a 'congregation' might mean two people on a park bench, silently sharing their faith.” The public execution in 2009 of Ri Hyon Ok is also cited as an example of the common handling of “crimes” such as the distributing of Bibles. Despite this, though, the underground church in North Korea is experiencing truly miraculous growth, and is estimated to be comprised of somewhere between 200,000 and 400,000 believers. Pray that this growth in spite of the odds would continue, that the Holy Spirit would reach into places where human words and voices cannot. Pray for the ministries which share the gospel with North Koreans who cross the border into China, and pray especially for new North Korean believers who risk all to return to share their new-found faith and freedom in Christ with their countrymen. (*The Wall Street Journal*)

Iran—While believers around the world celebrated the birth of Christ with great freedom, a group of 50 Muslim-background believers gathered quietly in Tehran on December 27 to observe Christmas together. However, 15 members of the security forces disrupted the gathering, and though courteous, forced all in attendance to fill out a questionnaire inquiring about how they had come to faith, and all their email and social media contacts and passwords. Cell phones were also confiscated. All will have to report to security forces at a later time to be individually interrogated as well. There is special concern for Armenian pastor Vruir Avanesian, who was detained that day and remains incarcerated in Evin Prison. Beyond the usual hardships of detention, Vruir also suffers from kidney disease and many are concerned for his health while he is imprisoned. It was confirmed that he was brought on December 31, that he was brought by prison guards to a hospital to receive dialysis and then was escorted back to prison. Pray for his sustenance and his health during this hardship. Also, MEC relays the following specific prayer requests:

- a. Vruir will know the peace, presence and strength of Jesus and will be released soon
 - b. He will continue to receive the medical treatment he requires
 - c. His wife and children will know the comfort and protection of Jesus each day. The others present at the Christmas gathering will know the peace of Jesus, that the investigations will be dropped and they will face no further legal proceedings
 - e. Christians in Iran will know the Spirit's wisdom, especially concerning when and where to meet for worship
 - f. All officials involved will love mercy, act justly, learn about Jesus and choose to follow Him.”
- (Middle East Concern)*

Saudi Arabi—A web editor in Saudi Arabia currently faces the death penalty for opening a forum to freely discuss religion and religious figures. Raif Badawi, the 30-year-old founder of the Free Saudi Liberals website, has experienced harassment since launching the site for peaceful debate in 2008. However, when he was charged with “insulting Islam using electronic channels,” his situation became more serious. After December 17, his charges were elevated to apostasy. Beyond facing the death penalty, Badawi has also experienced estrangement from his father and brother, and his wife's family has filed petitions in an effort to forcibly divorce him from his wife. Pray for this man, who has advocated bravely for free speech and peaceful expression in his country. Pray that his life will be preserved and that his family will see the courage and integrity of his actions and choose to support him, rather than reject and ostracize him. Pray that Badawi might find the total love and acceptance of Christ. *(Human Rights Watch)*

International—Finally, the last prayer item for this first month of 2013, we remember those who have languished already for years, and for whom a new year may only mean another year of suffering and separation from those they love. Pray specifically for Asia Bibi, a Pakistani wife and mother, imprisoned and facing the death penalty since June 2009; for Eritrean Christians, pastors and evangelists Dr. Kiflu Gebremeskel (imprisoned since 2004), Pastor Kidane Weldou (imprisoned since 2005), and Haile Nayzgi (imprisoned since 2004); Father Nguyen Van Ly, who has been imprisoned on and off since 2007, and is currently serving another sentence in Vietnam for his faith; and finally Gao Zhisheng, prominent Chinese Christian human rights lawyer, who has suffered extraordinary torture, persecution, and imprisonment in China since 2005. Pray that they will be able to experience the presence and comfort of the Holy Spirit. Pray for the sustenance and preservation of their faith. Pray for the protection of and provision for their families. Pray for the leaders of the nations that persecute them that they might recognize the gross injustice of their actions and seek truth and integrity, and begin to rule with the best interests of their people in mind. *(PrisonerAlert.com)*