

PERSECUTION

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S MONTH

Sisters of Strength



HIGHLIGHTING THE STRUGGLE AND
RESILIENCE OF OUR PERSECUTED SISTERS

INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN

Contents

MARCH 2024

ON THE COVER

Christian women in Nigeria are often victimized at a young age and forced into marriages and faith conversions. Read more on p. 18.

FEATURES

12

BEHIND THE VEIL

Christian Women Forced to Wear Islamic Dress in Afghanistan.

16

SILENCED HEROISM

A Pakistani Christian Shares Her Story of Persecution.

18

SISTERS OF STRENGTH

ICC Stands By Persecuted Women in the Middle East.

22

THE CRIES OF NIGERIAN WOMEN AND GIRLS

Millions of Christian Girls and Women Raped and Forced to Marry in Nigeria.

RECURRING

04

ICC NEWSROOM

Your Source for Persecution News

06

WEST WATCH

Issues Involving Christianity in the West

08

YOUR HANDS AND FEET

ICC Projects Made Possible by Our Supporters

10

FRONT LINES OF MINISTRY

A Deep Dive Into the Lives of Church Planters and Pastors

26

CROWNS OF COURAGE

Highlighting Those Who Have Sacrificed Everything for Christ



@persecuted



@persecutionnews



@internationalchristianconcern



International Christian Concern

OUR MISSION: Since 1996, ICC has served the global persecuted church through a three-pronged approach of advocacy, awareness, and assistance. ICC exists to bandage the wounds of persecuted Christians and to build the church in the toughest parts of the world.

DONATIONS: International Christian Concern (ICC) is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) (all donations tax-deductible). ICC makes every effort to honor donor wishes in regards to their gifts. Occasionally, a situation will arise where a project is no longer viable. ICC will redirect those donated funds to one of our other funds that is most similar to the donor's original wishes.



© Copyright 2024 ICC, Washington, D.C., USA. All rights reserved.
Permission to reproduce all or part of this publication is granted
provided attribution is given to ICC as the source.

2020 Pennsylvania Ave. NW #941 | Washington, DC 20006-5441



STAFF

Publisher Jeff King

Managing Editor Alex Finch

Editor and Designer Hannah Campbell

A Father to Widows and Orphans

Many of you were touched by the heart-wrenching story of Naomi who suffered so much in the Nigeria. Her saga last year is far too common for persecuted Christians and women in Africa. With their husbands killed by jihadists, widows are often forgotten in a violent landscape.

Naomi's life was crushed when radical Islamists steamrolled her village. They shot Naomi and cut her with a machete, leaving her for dead in a burning home. She miraculously survived with 80% of her body covered with burns, and our team paid her medical bills.

We recently learned, however, that Naomi succumbed to her injuries. She is finally at peace with her heavenly Father. Our staff grieved her death, yet we were thankful to come alongside this courageous soul for just a brief time. And we will see her again.

There are so many countless widows in Africa who, like Naomi, have a daunting uphill climb, called to be breadwinners as they languish in IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps.

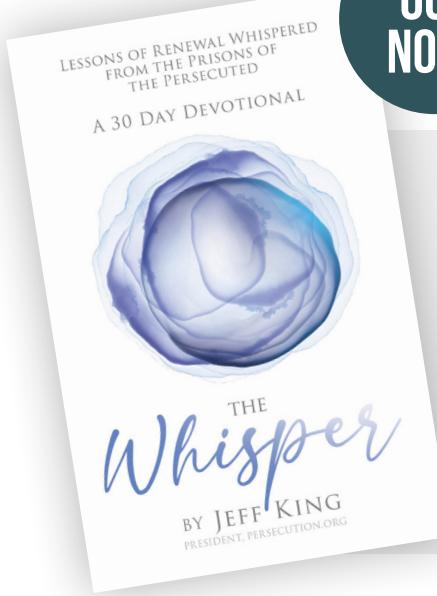
One of our new initiatives is helping the hundreds and thousands of widows who are struggling to survive. While we supply them with food and other necessities, we want them to go beyond day-to-day survival. So, we set them up with a small farm for long-term sustenance.

We know that none of this surprises Jesus, and we relish that day when He returns to His creation again and makes everything right. Until then, we will do whatever we can to ease the suffering of widows and orphans caused by the evil one.

I'm reminded of Psalm 68:5 that says, "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling."

Thank you so much for joining us in this vital ministry.

JEFF



Jeff King, President
International Christian Concern
Author: *The Last Words of the Martyrs, Islam Uncensored*, and *The Whisper*

Discover the Life-Changing Lessons of the Persecuted

ICC President and author Jeff King released his third book, *The Whisper*, last month. In this 30-day devotional, King presents stories of persecuted believers and unpacks their spiritual wisdom as they walk with the Lord through trials and triumphs. How are they able to endure such suffering and remain joyful in the Lord? What lessons can we learn from them?

ICC Newsroom

YOUR SOURCE FOR PERSECUTION NEWS



Arab Parliament Defends Algeria's Religious Freedom Violations

Despite nearly every Christian church being shut down in Algeria, the Arab Parliament recently came to the country's defense, claiming that Algeria has made great efforts to promote religious freedom.

The statement came in response to the U.S. Department of State's recent placement of Algeria on its Special Watch List (SWL) for engaging in and tolerating concerning violations of religious freedom. The Arab Parliament condemned the State Department's decision, stating that "American interference in issues related to religious freedom is completely unacceptable." The legislative body called Algeria a "role model in promoting religious freedom" and stated the country is committed to

"strengthening commonalities between different religions."

Yet the reality for Algerian Christians tells a different story.

Since 2017, the Algerian government has forcibly closed more than 40 Christian churches, most of which are affiliated with the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA). Routine church closures stem from the 2006 ordinance, which requires non-Muslim worship to operate only in licensed buildings. To date, the licensing commission has yet to issue a single permit. As a result, many congregations were forced to meet in underground house churches – and in 2023, authorities clamped down on this, limiting house church gatherings to ten people.

Three Indian Churches Raided by Radical Hindus, Pastors Arrested

Three churches in the village of Amdi, India, were forced to close last weekend after a mob of right-wing radicals stormed their regular Sunday morning services.

The attackers ransacked the homes where congregants were gathered and warned them of further consequences should they continue to meet for worship. Christians in the village were left in a state of fear and intimidation, further worsened by the refusal of police to register a report against the attackers.

In the aftermath of the attack, three pastors were arrested and falsely charged with alleged 'forced conversion activities' – a common charge leveled against Indian Christians by government officials when no true crimes have been committed.

The three men were Pastor Santosh Sahu of Immanuel Church, who has been conducting his services for the last 12 years, Pastor Thakur Ram of Church of God, and Pastor Bhagchand Dhibar of A.G. Church. They were later released on bail, but that did little to ease the concern caused by the mob.

Chhattisgarh is one of the five Indian states that held elections last month to select their Chief Minister. Pro-Hindu BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) had a landslide victory in these elections, twisting power from their close opponent, Indian National Congress. This win could embolden the radical Hindu nationalists to attack and intimidate innocent Christians for their political benefit.

Please continue to pray for believers in India under this new anti-Christian state government.



Vietnamese Christians Feature Heavily in Latest Prisoners of Conscience List

In the latest prisoners list recently released from the advocacy group Defend the Defenders (DTD), Vietnamese Christians again feature prominently.

DTD statistics noted that 258 prisoners of conscience were imprisoned or on home detention sentences across Vietnam. Over one-quarter of these prisoners are from the predominantly Christian minority Montagnard and Hmong ethnic groups.

DTD showed that all these prisoners have been harassed, imprisoned, and arrested because of exercising their right to freedoms of expression, peaceful

assembly, and religion or belief. This comes at odds with the Vietnamese Communist Party's Marxist regime. The list includes bloggers, lawyers, unionists, land rights activists, political dissidents, and religious leaders.

ICC has highlighted in recent months the difficult plight of Vietnamese Christians. This includes Christian leaders imprisoned in Vietnam like Mr Trần Văn Bang who is currently serving four years in prison. Bang has opposed communist control of Vietnam and made public stands for his faith in Jesus.

Civil War Ceasefire in Myanmar Broken Within Hours by Tatmadaw Military Dictatorship

A fragile ceasefire brokered by the Chinese government on January 14 between the Tatmadaw and one of the pro-democracy military groups (the Three Brotherhood Alliance) was reportedly broken within hours of the agreement being signed. While war rages on throughout the country, Chinese officials tried to arrange a ceasefire in Shan State between the warring parties so they could protect and advance Chinese interests in Shan State (which borders China). But this was broken as fierce fighting continued. About 10% of

Shan State are Christians.

As the civil war continues, the Tatmadaw military dictatorship continues to lose massive amounts of ground, armed conflicts, and strategic sites as these ethnic armed militias from around Myanmar join together to overthrow the Tatmadaw since the rebellion began on Oct. 27, 2023. ICC is continuing to monitor this volatile situation and working with local partners to establish ways to help suffering Christians affected by the civil war.

China's New Patriotic Education Law Tightens Grip on Church Leaders

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) new controversial Patriotic Education Law came into force on January 1 and party officials reviewed the new guidelines with church leaders.

The CCP met with the five authorized state religions to show how religious groups can adhere to the far-reaching Patriotic Education Law. Communist ideology and the Sinicization of religion in China dominate the new law. The CCP states in the guidelines to religions that the state is greater than religion, and the state law is greater than religious rules.

Christians will continue to face increased persecution as this contentious law is applied, especially by the five main CCP controlled religious associations. Bitter Winter reported on a last-minute addition to the law that adds greater pressure on religious people, with Article 21 reinforcing the idea that "religious clergy and believers" should also mobilize and cooperate in the propaganda effort and mentions specific content such as "promoting core socialist values and promote the construction of socialist culture with Chinese characteristics."



West Watch

ISSUES INVOLVING CHRISTIANITY IN THE WEST

Proposed Bill in Ireland Threatens Christian Speech

A proposed bill before the Irish Parliament is raising concerns for free speech across the country. The Criminal Justice (Incitement to Violence or Hatred and Hate Offences) bill 2020, if passed, would criminalize any speech that incites "hatred or violence" against a protected group. The legislation interprets protected groups to mean an individual or class of people based on certain characteristics such as race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. At face value, the bill sounds virtuous, but in reality, it significantly restricts free speech and is viewed by many as a step toward authoritarianism.

The bill's absence of a clear definition for speech that meets the 'hateful' standard is of greatest concern. The arbitrary threshold leaves room for subjectivity and would afford protected groups the right to accuse anyone of hate speech, so long as they interpreted the speech to be hateful.

For Ireland's Christian population, the bill would severely limit their expression of many beliefs, including views on biblical marriage. It also threatens the right to share one's faith or publicly evangelize. Sharing a bible verse, such as Exodus 20:3, which says, "Thous shall have no other Gods before me," could be interpreted as hate speech by another religious group.

If convicted of hate speech under the proposed bill, the accused could face up to 5 years in prison.



THE CAPITOL DISPATCH
ADVOCACY ON THE PERSECUTED FRONT LINES
★ FROM INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN ★

ICC UPDATE TO THOSE ON CAPITOL HILL

If you'd like to stay informed about ICC's advocacy work and policy recommendations, subscribe to our monthly newsletter, *The Capitol Dispatch* at www.persecution.org/icc-advocacy



Denmark Reestablishes Blasphemy Law

In late December 2023, Danish parliament officially amended a portion of its penal code condemning blasphemy. The portion of the code states, “[A] person is to be punished [when they] publicly or with the intent of [influencing] a wider circle are guilty of [the crime] of recognized religious community, or an object that appears to be such a text.”

The amendment appears in section 110 of the Danish penal code which discusses the public mockery of a foreign nation through various methods. The addition in this specific portion of the text clarifies that the aim is to protect Danish foreign relations. Despite the wording and location however, blasphemy laws of any sort have been viewed as extremely problematic throughout the world with Denmark abolishing its previous blasphemy law in 2017.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) released a report on December 26, denouncing the decision made by the Danish parliament. While clarifying that USCIRF condemns the burning of religious texts and other objects of religious significance, USCIRF Commissioner David Curry critiqued the Danish government saying, “Criminalizing blasphemy is the wrong approach and not effective in addressing either security concerns or the underlying hatred experienced by religious communities.”

POCKET POLICY

A CALL FOR JUSTICE

Condemning Persecution in Vietnam

Senate Resolution 395 proposes the United States’ Senate recognize the contributions of Montagnard Christians from Vietnam during the Vietnam war, a public condemnation of the continued persecution of Christians by the Vietnamese government and calls on the government to establish policies which support the Montagnards in both the United States and Vietnam.

Montagnards historically became Christian after French and Roman Missionaries converted many in Vietnam to various forms of Protestant Christianity. Since that time, Montagnards have been persecuted by the communist Vietnamese government which aims to has restricted freedom of religion or belief, movement, land and property rights, political expression, forced public denouncing of one’s religion, arrested and imprisoned who Montagnards who organized public demonstrations, mistreated Montagnards in detention amongst many other charges.

According to the 2019 USCIRF Report, one-quarter of prisoners of conscience were minority religious groups, including Montagnard Christians and 10,000 individuals in the Central Highlands are refused ID cards, household registration, and birth certificates by local authorities in retaliation for refusing to renounce their faith.

USCIRF has recommended Vietnam be designated a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) every year since 2002. During that time, that recommendation has not been fulfilled with Vietnam only reaching the designation of Special Watch List, the level under CPC. Additionally, this designation has only been achieved in 2022 and 2023.



Your Hands and Feet

ICC PROJECTS MADE POSSIBLE BY OUR SUPPORTERS



Giving Hope After Al-Shabab Attacks

AFRICA

In October 2023, al-Shabab terrorists attacked Lamu West, burning six homes, attacking trucks on the road, and killing innocent people caught in their path. Given the rise of al-Shabab attacks in the area, many villagers have fled their homes to live inside IDP camps where security is better.

Kaingu was a driver killed while transporting goods. He left behind his wife and two children whom ICC provided assistance to.

"My husband left us unexpectedly. We were with him in the morning before he left with the truck to deliver goods to Lamu. We prayed and hoped to see him in two days, only to be contacted by his boss in the evening that he had been shot dead by the al-Shabab terrorist while heading to Lamu. We were shocked and began to cry. I could not even comfort our two little girls who loved him deeply. This was a great loss to us as a young family and we wished that he could have been with us longer. But we strongly believe that the Lord has His plans that cannot be thwarted. He does whatever glorifies him and what builds us in faith... We have been praying for strength to cope with this loss and we are seeing Him answering our prayers. We thank you for following up our case and coming to

visit us twice. We also thank you for the food aid and financial assistance you have given to us," said Mary, widow to the late Kaingu.

ICC also supplied meals to the IDP camp, and provided school supplies to the children. One Christian resident of the IDP camp expressed his profound gratitude for ICC hearing their cry.

"The past four months have been difficult for the Christians here in Lamu. The attacks on Christian villages by al-Shabab begun in June and they are continuing. We have lost loved ones and property and now we live in IDP camps. Our farms are inaccessible and so the situation continues to worsen. We have got no means of making ends meet, and the government has stopped supporting us. We depend on well-wishers, but when aid comes to the camp, only a few of us get it since everybody cannot get it, said Peter. "But ICC has done something special for us. They called us to the church where we received assistance, both physical and spiritual. Thank you for remembering all those that their houses were burnt and loved ones killed and treating us as a special group. You have warmed our hearts and we pray that the Lord blesses you."



Restoring a Barbershop After ISIS Destroyed Everything

MIDDLE EAST

Danny and his family used to live in Mosul before 2007. He had a barbershop which he owned with his friend. When the situation began to deteriorate in Mosul, with cases of killings, kidnappings, and extortion by unknown parties against Christians, he decided to leave and move to Qaraqosh where he opened his own barbershop. He continued working there until 2014 when ISIS occupied Mosul and the Nineveh Plains. "The invasion of ISIS into Qaraqosh was a shock to me. I thought I had escaped from Mosul 14 years ago, but the explosions caught up with me. Where do I go now?"

"When I entered Erbil, I felt safe. I told my family, 'Today, I have been reborn,'" said Danny. They slept in tents in the church garden like so many. "The displacement period was difficult for me because I used to be a shop owner. But now I work as an employee in a shop. The barbers in the shop sometimes treated me like an unwanted displaced person, but I remained patient and said, 'May God forgive them.'

"I returned and saw that Qaraqosh was destroyed. My shop was robbed, and our apartment was stolen, even the doors. But it doesn't matter as long as we have returned."

ICC helped Danny reopen his barber shop back to its former glory.

"Everything you have done for me, ICC, I will never forget, and my family will never forget. You have revived hope within me. Thank you! I don't know what to say; you are the peace dove to Qaraqosh. My daily income will improve thanks to you. I will pay for my daughter's medical treatment from my own earnings, and I won't borrow from anyone anymore," said Danny.



Beaten by His Coworkers for His Faith

SOUTH ASIA

A Christian driver was attacked by his Muslim extremist coworkers after he received a promotion in Pakistan. Noel is a father of four and has been working as a driver for the last five years. Because of his hard work, honesty, and punctuality, he was promoted to supervisor. However, his Muslim coworkers refused to work under a Christian supervisor. He didn't take the threats seriously until it was too late.

When he left the workplace, about half a dozen Muslim coworkers stopped him on the road and they dragged him and thrashed him with clubs and iron rods. They left Noel unconscious on the road where he was found by Good Samaritans and sent him to the local hospital. The mob broke two ribs and two bones in his legs. His face was badly scratched as well.

The medical bills for his hospital stay began to stack up, as he required expensive treatment daily for his injuries. Hearing of the family's financial distress, ICC came to his aid and paid the family's medical bills.

"Earlier, I was sick of thinking how we would have any money left for my family, but you helped me in my difficult time and made it easier for me. Thank you and may God bless you," said Noel.



Front Lines of Ministry

A DEEP DIVE INTO THE LIVES OF CHURCH PLANTERS AND PASTORS

ARRESTED FOR REFUSING TO DENOUNCE HIS FAITH

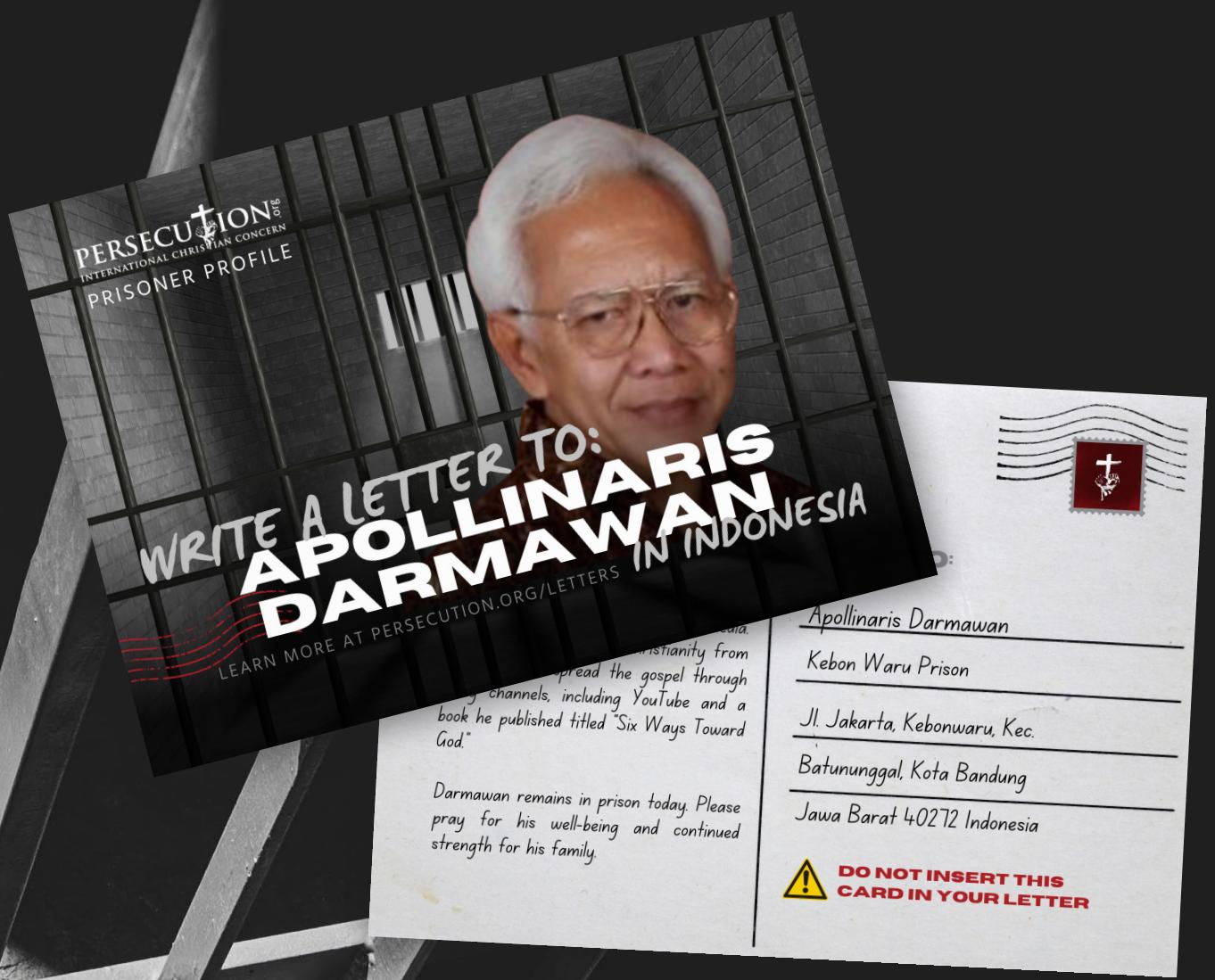
Apollinaris Darmawan is an elderly Christian man who has been imprisoned in Indonesia since 2020. In August 2020, Darmawan was arrested by local police after being accused of insulting the Prophet Muhammad and Islam on social media. Darmawan allegedly made comments on Twitter, writing on his profile page that “Islam is not a religion, but a heretical teaching that silences and uncivilizes its people.”

The Muslim-turned-Catholic man also used other channels, such as YouTube, to post a video critical of Islam’s teachings and has written a book titled *Six Ways Toward God*, in which he encourages readers to search for the truth.

Local Muslims were angered by his comments and stormed Darmawan’s home on August 8, 2020, dragging him into the street and stripping him before the police came and took him into custody at the Badung Police Precinct.

A few months later, the Bandung District Court sentenced Darmawan to five years in prison and gave him a fine of 800 million rupiah (\$51,590 USD) for “disseminating information aimed at inflicting hatred or dissension on individuals and/or certain groups of community-based on ethnic groups, religions, races, and inter-groups.”

Darmawan remains in prison today. Please pray for his well-being and for continued strength for his family.



WRITE TO MR. DARMAWAN AND OTHER PRISONERS OF FAITH TODAY!

You can make a difference for Christians in prison today.

Through our Prison Letter Writing Campaign, you will have the opportunity to make a tangible difference in the lives of those in prison for their faith. By sending letters of encouragement and committing to pray for these prisoners, our hope is that these bold and faithful believers would know their brothers and sisters in Christ remember and see their suffering.

To learn more and download your FREE letter writing packet, visit www.persecution.org/letters

Behind the Veil

Christian Women Forced to Wear Islamic Dress in Afghanistan

BY ICC'S SOUTH ASIA REGIONAL TEAM

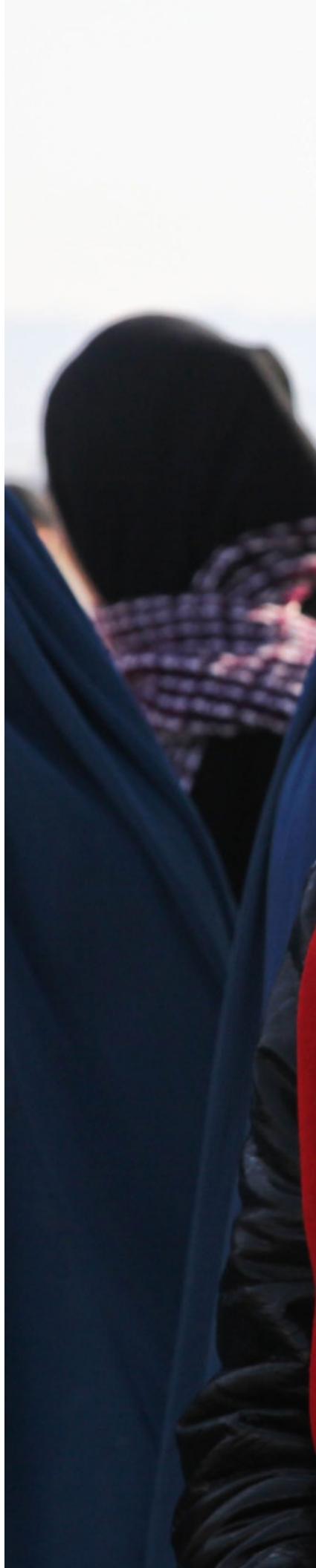
The Taliban's Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice has cracked down on women who fail to observe the strict dress code, starting at the beginning of 2024. Dozens of women have been arrested in the streets of Kabul and taken to unknown locations. The spokesperson for the Ministry referred to this as "bad hijab" and warned women they would continue tracking down those in violation of the rule.

This development comes on top of a multitude of restrictions Afghan women and girls are already facing, including restrictions on education, work, travel, and even healthcare. To be a Christian woman in Afghanistan would almost certainly bring a death sentence.

The brutal control of the Taliban has infiltrated every part of Afghan society, down to what its citizens can eat and drink, listen to, and even so far as to what they can wear. Several months after the terrorist group regained control of the country in August 2021, Taliban officials issued a decree outlining a strict Islamic dress code for women, allowing them only to reveal their eyes in public. Not only is this a grave infringement on the rights of women and girls, but it forces Afghan Christians and other religious minorities to adhere to the Taliban's strict interpretation of Sharia law.

The U.S. Department of State estimates that the Christian population ranges from 500-8,000 individuals in Afghanistan. As the Taliban re-implements strict laws from its earlier rule in the late 1990s, Christians have gone into hiding or have been forcibly displaced into neighboring countries. Reports have shown the Taliban has no mercy for individuals complacent to their radical laws.

In a press conference concerning the declining state of human rights in Afghanistan, spokesperson for the State Department, Matthew Miller, said, "The decisions made risk irreparable damage to Afghan society and move the Taliban further away from normalizing relations with the international community." 





Silenced Heroism

A PAKISTANI CHRISTIAN SHARES HER STORY OF PERSECUTION

BY GUEST CONTRIBUTOR FROM PAKISTAN

As a Christian woman living in Pakistan, I feel that there is a certain judgment criterion that precedes my reputation. A general label regarding the clothing choices of Christian females and how they are an easy target to be persuaded and invaded for various reasons and purposes. There is always a false perception in the eyes of society that Christian women can take liberties in relationships more than Muslim women.

The Christian community faces discrimination in all aspects of life based on their religion, and the discrimination is supported by the constitution, law, and policies designed by the state. Women are the marginalized segment of society and being a minority woman is being double jeopardized.

I faced discrimination at my university while studying at a private university in Lahore. Being the only Christian student in my academic department, I faced a lot of discrimination. A teacher deliberately used to give me an "F" grade because of my faith, and I repeated that course three times during the tenure of that teacher, failing to secure a grade other than "F." However, I managed to get an "A" as soon as the teacher was replaced.

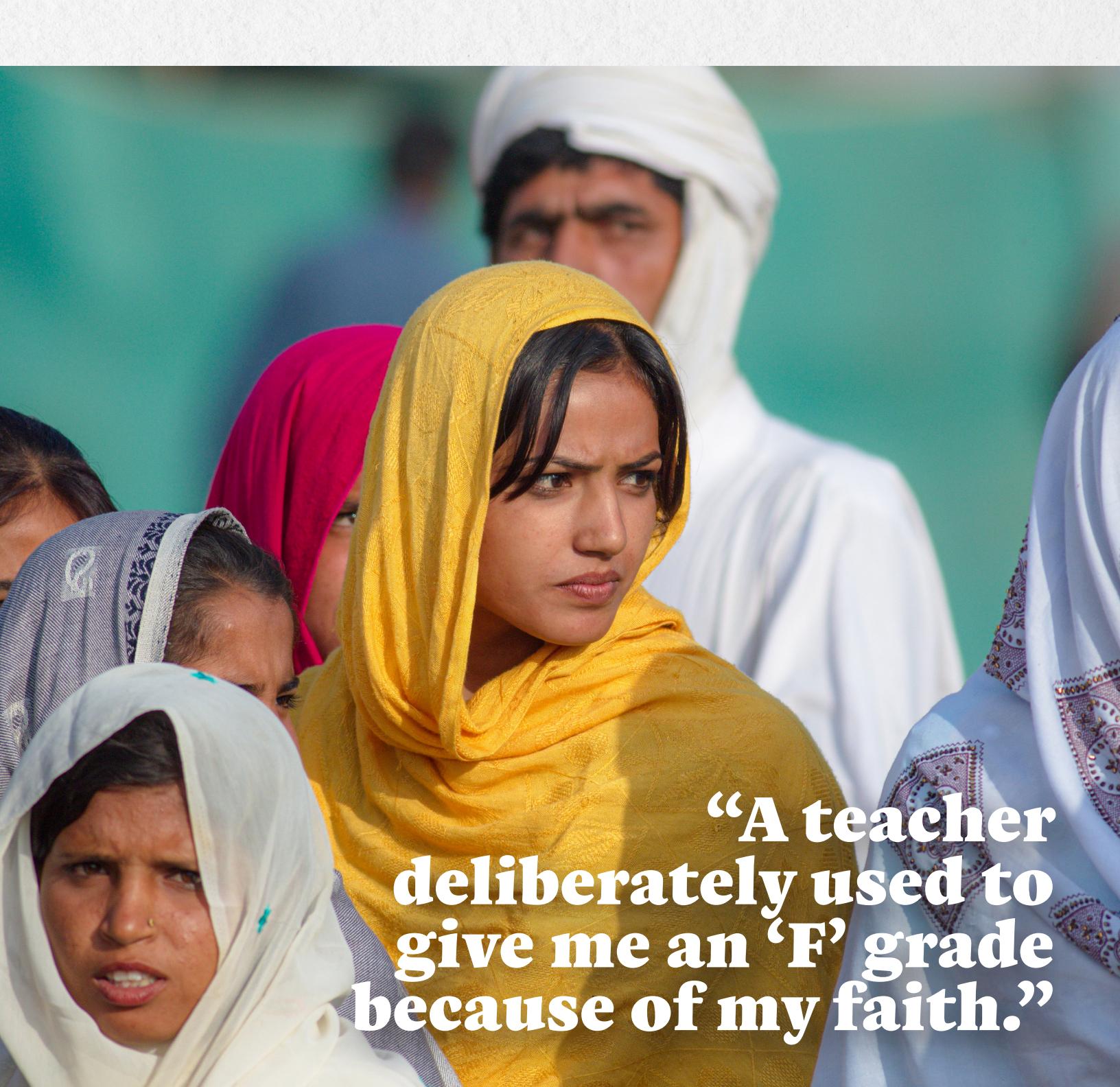
THE COST OF FAITH

The moment I learned the gravity of my faith being a danger to my safety was when Salman Taseer was murdered due to taking a stance for Asia Bibi. A nationwide holiday was announced 12 years ago on the 5th of January for national mourning for him.

In this nationwide holiday, we learned to mask our true feelings for the case of Asia Bibi and to behave ourselves in college by not taking part in any discussions. Salman Taseer was a hero in our home, yet when I came to the horizons of my college, I learned to comprehend the fact that Salman Taseer was a sinner who never deserved a funeral just for the reason he spoke up for the rights of minorities in Pakistan. I was brought up in a Christian institution, yet I felt scared in between the walls of that college, for in every corner, I could just listen to the whispers of how my faith is condemnable theology.

There are so many events that I've experienced throughout my life where I've felt that my safety would be jeopardized by my religious identity. On the day Asia Bibi got released, it was nationwide chaos for Christians. Many of us couldn't drive with the symbol of a crucifix in our cars; university students, even my sister, were exposed to this incident of brutal torture.





“A teacher deliberately used to give me an ‘F’ grade because of my faith.”

A MESSAGE FOR THE WEST

In most cases, Christian women in Pakistan are the breadwinners in their households. They are the ones facilitating and providing for their families, and most of these Christian women are nurses. Christian women in Pakistan are brave and bold enough to be the witness and source of the true gospel in their workplace and their groups through their living example. They are sharing Christianity rather boldly through their conduct and demeanor. They are ambassadors of Christ in the Muslim community of Pakistan. 

Sisters of Strength

ICC stands by persecuted women in the Middle East

By ICC's MENA Regional Team

Where religious and cultural tensions run high, Christian minorities face unique struggles in the heart of the Middle East. Amid these struggles, women bear the burden of being both believers and females in a region where they are often treated as third-class citizens. Yet they find their strength in silence and sometimes isolated from their entire families and communities. The following stories of six brave Christian women we've come alongside of are testaments to the resilience and strength that they find in the Lord, in light of the trauma they've experienced.

LAILA

Laila, a 43 year old widow, did not have support from her community after her husband died. She was uneducated and didn't have much job experience.

"I tried hard to find a job and worked in a sewing factory, where it was long working hours and little pay. But we were content with what we had," she said.

That was until she was laid off due to rising costs and inflation. She found work for a Muslim family as a housemaid and was treated well for awhile. The family decided to host a large birthday party for their 20-year-old son, and due to the extra work, Laila enlisted the help of her teenage daughter for the night of the party. Laila was serving food when she had a realization.

"Suddenly, I looked around and did not find my daughter. I went looking for her, and heard muffled screams and found the birthday boy trying to rape her. His mother came in and said, 'Let him do what he wants, and we will pay you. You are Christians and have no morals.' When I gathered my strength, I shouted to call for help from the guests, but the family accused my daughter of theft. No one believed me."

Laila was out of a job with no means to provide for her daughter. ICC helped her start a clothing and linen business so she was able to leave the household and support her family.

"I would like to thank our Lord because even in the midst of the most difficult situations, God saved us and never abandoned us. I want to thank you for the project you provided for me," said Laila.

SAMIRA

"My problem started after my husband died when I had to work. I worked in a room service in a small hotel downtown. I was exposed to a lot of harassment," said Samira. "One day, I delivered an order to a room and was about to take the elevator. One of the guests was following me and took the elevator with me and offered me sex for money. I asked the owner of the hotel to move me out of room service, as I could no longer tolerate customer harassment. His response was, 'You are young and beautiful and you can

make money working in room service, but you have to be smart.' My request was rejected, so I left work."

With little work experience, Samira's job options were limited, and many other options for inexperienced women often involved risks involving harassment that can lead to violence.

"All I want is to live in the fear of God and be able to provide for my three children," she said.

After hearing of her struggle to find a safe job, ICC helped her start her own small business to sell clothes and other goods to customers to independently provide for her family.

"Thanks to you, I can now work on my own business and support my children. I hope you remember me in your prayers and thank you for your help," said Samira.

MIRIAM

"My name is Miriam. I married a widower with children. Throughout our marriage, I took care of his children, as well as the children we had together. After my husband died, his children, who converted to Islam, kicked me out of the apartment. I went to church and they helped me by renting an apartment," said Miriam.

She continued to tell us her story. "The area where the apartment is, is in a slum. Christians are a minority and Muslims are extremists. However, I had

no choice. The church paid the rent, and I found work as a cleaner. Of course, it was not easy for a woman to live alone with her two daughters in an area like this. I have a Muslim neighbor who is always harassing me. In the end, I'm an adult and I can protect myself, but the neighbor was always taking advantage of my absence at work and knocking on my daughters' door. Because I always warn my daughters never to open the door to anyone, they did not respond to him."

"A month ago, on my daughters' way back from school, this neighbor was waiting for them near the house. He told them to go with him and said I sent him to bring them to our relatives house. They were terrified and ran home," she said.

Since then, she has not gone to work in fear of the neighbor returning to do worse. ICC helped Miriam start a small business to tailor clothes out of her home so that she can stay home and make a living for her family, while protecting her daughters.

"I would like to thank you for your help. And now I feel reassured about my daughters because I do not have to leave them alone for long hours and they will go with me everywhere. I thank God that He responded to me, looked at my weakness, and supported me," said Miriam.

FATIMA

"I got married to my husband and we were very happy, but that happiness did not last long. We were Christians in a majority-Muslim area," Fatima began as she told her harrowing story with us.

"I was subjected to a lot of harassment that would be difficult for any young woman to endure. They were uttering obscene words and threats, such as, 'We will bring you to us, and Islam is the solution for people like you.' A lot of things happened like this, and I was afraid to tell my husband because I didn't want to get him in trouble. I hoped that they would limit themselves to verbally expressing their hatred for us Christians, but no."

"More than that, they tried many times to take advantage of my husband going out to work and knocking on my door. At that time, I felt that I could not bear my

fear, so I decided to tell my husband. I called him while he was at work and told him someone was talking from behind the door and telling me that he won't leave me alone. I told my husband everything. He came quickly and when he arrived home, there were three men waiting for him outside.

"They beat him on the head and body with a stick, causing him to lose consciousness. After he fell to the ground, the attackers fled...I told him that when I screamed and threatened to go to the police, they said, 'You Christians, you worshipers of the cross, will not be able to do anything. This is our city and we will cleanse it of people like you. Either you are with us, or you are against us, and whoever resists us will not live.'

"We spent the night praying to God to save us from them, and when we slept, one of them entered through the window and turned on the gas in the apartment, intending for us to die of suffocation. But we felt it, thanks to God. He didn't enter our room. We fled our home to the city where my uncle lives. My husband has been working for two months, but I dream that we will get help renting an apartment in which my husband and I can live, and that we will leave my uncle's house," said Fatima.

"We have been through difficult times and were terrified of extremists. But now we feel safe, and we thank you for supporting us. May our Lord bless you."

HANNA

Hanna comes from a Muslim family, but received Jesus as her Savior when she was 17 years old. Secretly, Hanna grew in faith and lived for Christ, but did not tell anyone in her family for fear of them turning on her.

Her family married her to a Muslim man, and she could not refuse. Hanna lived with her husband and raised her three children. She constantly took them to church and baptized them and they received Jesus as their Savior.

Unfortunately, Hanna's husband discovered her and her children's faith. He threatened to take everything away, and

slowly did that, one by one. Her oldest son went off to Ukraine for school and joined the military when the war started to make income for himself and send to his mother.

Hanna received the news of her son's death. Since then, her husband has refused to give her and her surviving daughters any money and she has no means of making money. Her husband kicked her out of the home and kept her daughters, who desperately wish to live with their mother.

"This is my story," said Hanna. "I do not know what to do. I am a mother who lost my son because of his father, and I am also about to lose my daughters because of him. I hope to get help to rent a flat so my daughters would live with me so I can protect them from their cruel father."

ICC helped Hanna with rent and now her two daughters live with her.

"I would like to thank God and thank you for this apartment because we were desperate. But thanks to your generous support, I have a place to live. Now my daughters can live with me and leave their evil father," said Hanna.

SARAH

"My story begins when my husband met a Muslim woman. His behavior changed and he became abusive toward me and would disappear for days," said Sarah. "After that, he converted to Islam, divorced me, and left me and my children to shame, disgrace, and need. I spent the worst days of my life, and then I decided to leave my hometown and move so that I could support my children away from their father."

"I work in cleaning houses and stairs, and I receive a small wage that is barely enough for us. I have difficulties paying the rent."

In order to help her move away from her abusive ex-husband, ICC helped pay for Sarah's rent.

"I want to thank you very much for the help you have given me. Because of your project, we will not need anyone's help as I work as a cleaner and we can live with the money I earn. I thank God for answering my prayers," said Sarah. 

The Cries of Nigerian Women and Girls

Millions of Christian girls
and women raped, and
forced to marry in Nigeria...
but is anyone listening?

By Lynn Arias

A deep ocean of tears continues to flow in Nigeria as Christian girls and women are forced into marriages, some as children, and made to convert to Islam. For decades, millions of women and girls in the West African nation have been subjected to rape, sexually transmitted diseases, and physical and mental abuse as a result of forced marriage and compelled conversion to Islam by Muslim extremists.







A YOUNG LIFE STOLEN

Christian girls are often targeted and abducted to become child brides and modern day slaves for their captors as a result of widespread religious intolerance and discrimination against Christians within Nigeria. As of 2021, data from UNICEF revealed that just over 30% of Nigerian women aged 20 to 24 had been married before reaching the age of 18, and 12% of women in the same age group were married before their 15th birthday. An untold number of these marriages were forced upon the girls as they were given the choice to convert to Islam and be wed or to suffer torture and death.

Attacks and abductions of Christian girls are often carried out by the Islamic terrorist group known as Boko Haram, whose name literally translates to “Western education is forbidden.” The terrorists view the girls as inferior because of their Christian faith and subject them to abhorrent abuse.

In April 2014, 276 girls were abducted from a secondary school in Chibok, Nigeria by Boko Haram. As written in a scholarly assessment of slavery within Boko Haram, one of the survivors recounted the horrors of what she endured.

“I do not know what hell fire is like, but a day in BH [Boko Haram] captivity may be worse than 100 days there for a non-Muslim captive,” she explained. “Some Muslim women treated us worse than their husbands did to us. Those women were holding non-Muslim girls for their husbands to assault, rape, and torture.”

As of April 2023, nine years after the brutal abductions, 98 of the 276 girls were still in Boko Haram captivity. According to Amnesty International, the parents of the remaining missing girls allege the Nigerian government has cut off communication with them and callously forgotten their daughters.

Attacks like the one in Chibok have occurred time and again. On February 19, 2018, a terrorist group connected with Boko Haram, the Islamic State - Western Africa Province (ISWAP), attacked a school in Dapchi, Nigeria and abducted 110 girls. Five of the girls died from trampling and suffocation during the attack and 104 of the girls were eventually returned to their families. One remaining girl, Leah Sharibu, was never freed and continues to be held captive by the terrorists because of her refusal to renounce her faith in Jesus Christ. She was 14 years old at the time of her capture and has remained a prisoner for nearly six years.

Following her abduction, the Leah Foundation was established in her honor. The organization advocates

for Leah as well as others who are being held against their wills to be released. Additionally, it provides sponsorship for girls' education.

A safehouse, called the Leah Foundation Hope & Freedom Center was also created on August 1, 2020. Since that time, approximately 120 survivors of terrorism have been helped by the center. The women may remain in the safehouse for a period of 8 to 11 months, during which time they are given Biblical discipleship, housing, food, education, and counseling. They are also offered valuable skills and job training in the fields of catering, tailoring, bead making, knitting, hair styling, and literacy in order to attain a level of independence.

After the women and girls have learned a skill, they graduate and are introduced to women's fellowship groups in local churches so that they may have a continued network of support. Representatives from the Leah Foundation follow up with the survivors as well to assist in their continued recovery.

AN ATTORNEY'S MISSION

Others in the nation have also taken up the cause of standing up for young Nigerian girls who have been brutalized and forced into marriages against their wills.

Abishag Sambo, an attorney in Nigeria, has made it her mission to help victims of forced marriage in returning home after they have been abducted.

Known locally as "the voice for the voiceless," Abishag has fought courageously for many years to rescue Christians from unspeakable situations. When speaking with ICC, she explained that Christian pastors and parents of the victims come to her for help when their daughters have been taken.

Abishag told of the horrific reality of girls as young as eight years old being abducted and forced to convert to Islam. They are often raped and treated as less than human. Some of the girls contract HIV and many are impregnated after they are forcibly married. In some cases, a Christian girl will be abducted, the terrorists will change her name, and they will send a letter to the girl's family stating that she has converted to Islam and wants to be married.

After the girls are "married," their husbands continue to abuse them and hold them in slavery, treating them as "second-class citizens," Abishag explained. She spoke of the lack of compassion from the Nigerian courts and justice system toward the victims, leaving the families with little recourse.

The memory of one girl in particular remains with Abishag to this day. It is the story of a 12-year-old girl who was caught and raped to the point of death by three Muslim boys. Abishag had helped the girl in a previous situation prior to the horrendous act that was perpetrated against her.

Abishag's heart was broken in pieces and, because of her immense compassion for the victim, she vowed to get justice for the young girl.

She prosecuted the three rapists and successfully secured life prison sentences for all three. The court was persuaded due to the fact that it was murder versus forced marriage.

Though difficult, through Abishag's incredibly hard work and God-given passion for the victims and families she represents, the girls are sometimes freed from their Muslim captors. She relentlessly visits police stations, makes court appearances, and advocates for the release of Christian girls.

On one occasion, Abishag gathered a group of women to loudly protest the capture of a Christian girl whose mother was a widow. They wailed and screamed in front of the local police station until finally the girl was released. She stated that when a girl who has been abducted gets released, she cries "tears of joy" and kneels down to thank God for their release.

Abishag explained that she has been threatened with violence and attempted intimidation but she has not given up. She explained that the police told her she may be in danger of a prison cell if she didn't stop advocating for the girls. Abishag boldly responded to them, saying that even if she were to be put in a cell, she would not stop shouting for the victims.



Attacks and abductions like those in Chibok, Dapchi, and many other instances have prompted many Christians in Nigeria and around the globe to conclude that a genocide of Christians is occurring in the country and the Nigerian government is looking the other way.

The current presidential administration in the United States appears to be doing the same thing. In 2021, the Biden administration removed Nigeria from the annual Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) list. It had been added to the CPC list in 2020 by then-President Donald Trump. The list names countries whose actions have egregiously infringed upon the religious freedoms of their citizens. When a country is placed on the list, a special envoy from the United States may be assigned to oversee and assure positive change is made within the CPC to remedy its religious freedoms violations.

Despite adding Boko Haram as an Entity of Particular Concern, the country of Nigeria remained off of the list once again this year. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) expressed its disappointment with the administration's decision in a statement posted to its website.

"There is no justification as to why the State Department did not designate Nigeria...as a Country of Particular Concern despite its own reporting and statements," the declaration read. "USCIRF calls on Congress to convene a public hearing on the failure of the State Department to follow our recommendations."

The Christian women and girls of Nigeria are strong and courageous. They have taken stands for Jesus and suffered for their faith in ways we cannot imagine. Let us remember their trials and suffering as we pray that our Almighty God would soften the hearts of Nigerian leaders and continue to bless those fighting for the hope and faith found in Jesus alone.

Those of us at ICC would also like to thank the Leah Foundation and the brave work of Abishag Sambo for all they do to help Christian women and girls. And to all the unsung heroes working for Jesus and following His commandments to help the least of us, we thank God for you. 



“Whatever you do, work at it with *all your heart*, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. *It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*”

- COLOSSIANS 3:23-24



REBUILDING LIVES AND FAMILIES IN A BLEAK LANDSCAPE

BY ICC'S AFRICA REGIONAL TEAM





The colorful tents packed in like sardines stretched to the horizon, home to far too many women and children who have endured unbearable emotional and physical scars.

In this overcrowded and under-resourced IDP (Internally Displaced Peoples) camp in Nigeria is enough suffering the world over. Remnants of Christian souls that were inexplicably uprooted by attackers who stole their lives, homes, and often husbands.

International Christian Concern (ICC) staffers visited several IDP camps in Nigeria in late 2023. What struck them were the overcrowded, dismal conditions – one government-run enclave was set up for hundreds yet housed thousands. The team, however, met resilient, joyful women who proudly showed off their meager abodes. A thin nylon canopy separated the families and their treasures from the elements, a fitting reminder of the fragility of this place. They still clung to Christ and the camaraderie and care for each other.

More than three million Christians in Nigeria's Middle Belt have been displaced by radical Fulani militants over the past 20 years. Many are widows, their husbands killed in attacks on villages they were forced to abandon. School-aged children play games and wander the streets. The women are sometimes desperate and trade their bodies for food or are raped. Crime is rampant. Yet ICC and other nonprofits are serving as a lifeline for necessities, helping the widows regain an economic foothold and use their skills to survive.

"These women and children have endured incredible suffering," said an ICC staffer. "Many have lost their husbands, and the children their fathers. Yet we see the hand of the Lord in big and small ways, and it's a privilege to come along side these amazing Christians. God sustains them, and we do what we can to supply fuel for their lives."

ICC has supported IDP camps in Nigeria and Kenya with food packets and water, clothing, and school uniforms and supplies for children.

ICC launched a Hope House Academy within one Nigeria IDP camp last year, supplying biblical schooling and more for children.

While the heart-wrenching needs are overwhelming, the recipients express their gratitude for the believers who cared for them from an ocean away.

RUTH

"I am truly glad to receive this food package, funds for buying new uniform and shoes for my children, and extra money to take care of my 2-year-old baby. We have been living in very deplorable conditions since our homes were destroyed by the al-Shabab people. Life at the IDP camp is very difficult, and sometimes we go without food. The government brings very small quantities of food, and the families subdivide amongst them. We are over 400 families in the camp, and so you can imagine what we are going through. Our farms have been destroyed by animals because we have left them. Your assistance today will go a long way in sustaining us for a few days as look for ways of providing for our families. May the Lord bless you."

ADISON

"Today we have witnessed a miracle. I am saying this because we haven't seen such an amount of food items given to the people affected directly by the recent attacks on Christian villages. The truth of the matter is that if the affected community was Islamic, support would be coming daily from fellow Muslims. But you have defied all odds and brought us relief at a time when everybody here was having nothing for the family. Children have been going to school without proper uniform since everything was burnt inside the houses. But today you have given us money to go and buy new school uniform for them. We also have money to buy daily supplies. Your act of kindness will never go unnoticed, and we pray that the Lord expands your ability to continue reaching to more suffering believers." 



Crowns of Courage

HIGHLIGHTING THOSE WHO HAVE SACRIFICED EVERYTHING FOR CHRIST

AKASH'S ETERNAL SACRIFICE

On March 15, 2015, the Christian community of Youhanabad, Pakistan, suffered an attack that left lasting scars. In a set of dual attacks, suicide bombers violently ambushed St. John's Catholic Church and Christ Church. When the dust settled, 21 people were killed and over 70 others were injured.

While the tragedy was devastating, it is a miracle that the death toll was not higher. This is largely due to the heroic efforts of Christian security volunteers who paid the ultimate price to prevent the bombers from entering the church compounds before detonating their deadly payloads.

Among the security volunteers was 20-year-old Akash Bashir, who was killed as he protected St. John's Catholic Church by tackling and pinning down the suicide bomber before he was able to enter the church.

Akash had volunteered to serve as a security guard shortly after a 2014 church bombing in Peshawar killed 85, hoping to prevent a similar tragedy.





In the aftermath of his death, Akash's mother Naz Bibi told ICC, "I am proud of giving birth to Akash. He was the apple of my eye and very brave and obedient. I now love to be called Akash's mother instead of Naz, my actual name."

"Foremost, I am alive because of him," Father Francis Gulzar, the parish priest of St. John's Catholic Church added. "I give thanks for this life I have because of him. More than a thousand faithful present at that time in and near the church thank him. The suicide bomber didn't come for Akash Bashir but for me and the worshipers. But Akash became a wall to protect us."

For his brave actions, Akash was eventually recognized with sainthood by the Catholic Church, Pakistan's first ever candidate for sainthood in the overwhelmingly Muslim nation.

Year after year, Youhanabad's Christian community gathers to remember those who lost their lives in these senseless attacks and honor those who helped prevent an even greater massacre.

Not only did Akash leave behind a legacy of courage and selflessness, he also continues to inspire others in the same way. His younger brother Arsalan recalled, "After his death, several youth came forward to become volunteer guards and I also decided to join them. Many have been inspired by his martyrdom."

Though his life was short, the impact he made was immeasurable and will surely be recognized for many years to come. 



We'd love to hear from you!

ICC
PO BOX 8056
SILVER SPRING, MD 20907

OR ONLINE AT
WWW.PERSECUTION.ORG

OR BY PHONE
800-ICC-5441

Giving via Will

Provide now for a future gift to ICC by including a bequest provision in your will or revocable trust. If you would like more information on giving to ICC in this way, please give us a call at 1-800-ICC-5441.

PERSECUTION.ORG
INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN

Photo: Protesters hold up signs for the global movement for women's rights in Afghanistan on January 14, 2023.