

A REPORT ON CHRISTIANS UNJUSTLY DETAINED FOR THEIR FAITH

SET YOUR CAPTIVES FREE



Aid to the Church in Need



I was sentenced to death in Pakistan for a crime I did not commit.

I was put in jail and placed in solitary confinement because of threats to my life – there was a bounty on my head. The Governor of the Punjab, Mr Salman Taseer, who came to see me in prison, and Mr Shahbaz Bhatti, a Christian, who was a government federal minister, both died for standing up for me. They were killed in cold-blooded murder because they were a voice for those like me falsely accused of blasphemy. Thousands of hardliners brought the country to a standstill simply to have me killed. And all because I am Christian.

I am not the only one. Today, as you read this, there are countless numbers of people who are unjustly detained; like me, their offence is the faith they refuse to renounce.

During my darkest moments, I promised that if I should survive my ordeal – a cross I bore for years on end – I would stand up for those who suffer, as I did. And that is why I am so honoured to contribute the Foreword for this report by the Catholic charity Aid to Church in Need – Set Your Captives Free: A Report on Christians

Unjustly Detained for their Faith. In this important document, you will read reports of Christians from all around the world abducted or imprisoned on false grounds. The report highlights those who shared my fate and who went to jail having been wrongfully found guilty of blasphemy. And then there are girls like 14-year-old Maira Shahbaz, the Catholic girl, also from Pakistan, abducted off the streets near their homes, forcibly converted, brutally raped and blackmailed. They are easy targets: their Christian faith makes them nobodies in society. The courts will not side with them. Indeed, nobody in our faith community can have their safety guaranteed. As this report makes clear, even the most senior fall victim to acts of unjust detention. Such is the evil carried out by sexual predators, militant groups and cruel regimes – all of them contemptuous of Christ and the Gospel’s call to show mercy.

One thing that so many of the people featured in this report have in common is that they are forced to suffer in silence. It is time that the world hears these stories; it is time to speak truth to power. It is time that those who detain innocent people in defiance of the law are brought to justice. It is time for governments to act. It is time to rally in support of our faithful communities, vulnerable, poor and persecuted. We should not rest until the oppressor finally hears our cry: “Set your captives free”.

SET YOUR CAPTIVES FREE

As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your captives free ...

ZECHARIAH 9:11 RSV (CE)

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INTRODUCTION

BY JOHN PONTIFEX

Father Paolo Dall'Oglio.

On the morning of 29th July 2013, Father Paolo Dall'Oglio walked into the offices of the governorate of Raqqa, in northern Syria. He has not been seen since.

Few people have cared as much about the cause of religious freedom as Father Paolo; few people have suffered more than him for their beliefs. In an interview in April 2005, held in Mar Musa, out in the Syrian desert, Father Paolo told me that the inter-faith centre he had created there offered “a new place of encounter” in the path towards inter-religious cooperation and mutual respect. Father Paolo is one of at least five¹ clergy – including two bishops – abducted by Daesh (ISIS) in Syria in 2013, men of faith whose whereabouts remain unknown, indeed it cannot be confirmed whether they are dead or alive.

Daesh is not alone in abducting Christians and other religious minorities. Around the world, militants, both those in sympathy with Daesh, and those with a very different outlook, including extremists from other faith traditions, target religious minorities with alarming regularity.

In addition to the widespread problem of abduction by non-state actors, there exists the disturbing

trend of state actors unjustly detaining members of faith minorities. Authorities arrest members of these groups without charge and incarcerate them at undisclosed locations or put them under house arrest.

THE GLOBAL SCALE OF UNJUST DETENTION OF CHRISTIANS

Unjust detention of Christians emerges as one of the most prevalent, enduring and serious forms of persecution according to research by Aid to the Church in Need (ACN). This relates to both wrongful arrest and kidnapping – including “the abduction and forced conversion of women – frequently accompanied by rape and other sexual violence”.² Every month, in the 50 worst-offending countries, an average of 309 Christians are unjustly imprisoned,³ according to Open Doors, which also calculated that 1,052 Christians were abducted in 2019.⁴ In ACN interviews, Church leaders have repeatedly cited widespread abduction and unjust imprisonment to explain why an “estimated 200

million Christians around the world... live under constant threat”.⁵ Highlighting the threat of kidnap facing Christians in northern Nigeria, as seen in the case of the 276 girls kidnapped from a school in Chibok,⁶ Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama of Abuja told of his concerns about “the kidnapping of Catholic priests and Sisters, fear and psychological trauma induced by fanatics and militants”.⁷ Meantime, amid a surge in the abduction of under-age Christian and other girls from minority faiths in Pakistan, Archbishop Sebastian Shaw of Lahore told ACN of the need to condemn as a “crime”⁸ the kidnapping and forced conversion of girls as young as 14.

ASSESSING THE PHENOMENON

This report on unjust detention of Christians assesses both state and non-state actors. Scenarios of unjust detention include:⁹

- **Prisoners of conscience** – those jailed for their religious beliefs, peacefully expressed, and without incitement to violence
- **Arbitrary detention** – those arrested or held without charge (due legal process)
- **Unfair trial** – those subjected to a show trial or prevented from defending themselves in court
- **Inadequate prison conditions** – those victim to over-crowding, solitary confinement, lack of food, clean water or toilet facilities, or denied sleep
- **Torture** – those victim to physical abuse including beatings
- **Pressure to convert** – those whose kidnappers or jailers force them to choose between their faith and freedom or who are subjected to ridicule, harassment for their faith

Although this report does not systematically examine these scenarios, they are present in a number of the case studies. The report also examines individuals forced into hiding under

threat of extra-judicial detention or execution and who live in self-imposed exclusion from society, unable to work, educate their children and access essential services for fear of exposure.

Incomplete data means tracking unjust detention is very difficult and this is suggested as a reason why the topic, and how it specifically relates to religious persecution, has perhaps not received the attention it deserves. People closest to those abducted are often fearful that publicity may hinder negotiations for release; often, it is difficult to attribute a clear religious motive in instances where it emerges that militants also seek a ransom, or where ethnicity or alleged political affiliation play a part. Frequently, reporting is not up-to-date or obscured by propaganda or fake news. Compared to other acts of outright persecution, including murder and attacks on religious buildings, ascertaining the facts of unjust detention is often problematic.

However, the need to find justice for the victims means that, whatever the difficulties, there is an urgent requirement to sift the data as best we can and take the necessary action to bring about the victims' release – or, at the very least, make progress towards establishing the facts of each case. The silent suffering of victims, the anguish of relatives, friends and family explains why unjust detention is the tool of choice for oppressors. It is because of this that Aid to the Church in Need has chosen to make a special study of this core aspect of human-rights violations against Christians and other faith minorities.

NOT ONLY A PROBLEM FOR CHRISTIANS

Christians are by no means the only faith minority to suffer unjust detention in large numbers. More than one million people, mainly Muslims, including many Uighurs, are reported to be held in “concentration camps”¹⁰ in China. A leaked government document from Xinjiang, called the Karakax List, which details the internment of 311 individuals, “reflects the extent to which the Chinese Communist Party has codified its intrinsic fear of religiosity and ethnic difference into a sophisticated set of criteria for internment”.¹¹ In September 2019, nearly two million people, mostly Muslims in Assam state,



Police in India remove protesters from a demonstration against attacks on Christians, including Father Dennis George.

north-east India, were threatened with detention or deportation after their names failed to appear on the government’s newly published National Register of Citizens. Reports described how those omitted from the register were at risk of being “sent to one of 10 mass detention camps the government plans to build, complete with boundary walls and watchtowers.”¹² Meanwhile, the systematic targeting of Rohingya Muslims, described by international lawyers as a genocide,¹³ has included what has been called the large-scale detention of refugees by Bangladesh¹⁴ and it is reported that those who try to escape from Burma (Myanmar) are locked up by authorities.¹⁵

COUNTRIES WORST AFFECTED

From around the world come fragments of information which, when brought together, show that – from China in the east, through the Indian Subcontinent, the Middle East, right across Africa and in parts of South America – thousands upon thousands of Christians are unjustly detained for their faith.

Nigeria is frequently ranked as the country where abduction of Christians is worse than anywhere else in the world. Every year, in Nigeria, more than 220 Christians are seized and unjustly imprisoned

by jihadist militia groups, according to Open Doors.¹⁶ Religious freedom observers noted “a surge of hundreds of kidnappings in 2019... numerous incidents of kidnappings for ransom and the killing of Protestant and Catholic priests”.¹⁷

From Pakistan come reports that during 2018, in one province alone – Sindh – there were 1,000 cases of forced conversions of Christian and Hindu girls and young women. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reported that girls were “being kidnapped, forcibly converted to Islam and married to Muslim men”.¹⁸ There were widespread reports that “young Christian women, many of them minors, were specifically targeted by Chinese human traffickers because of their poverty and vulnerability”.¹⁹

There is a similar problem in Egypt where young Coptic Christian women are abducted and forced to marry their non-Christian kidnappers. Such incidents have been happening since the 1970s.²⁰ While no comprehensive research has been carried out to establish the current level of the problem, according to Father Filopateer Gamil more than two to three girls disappear every day in Giza, and the number of cases brought to public attention is significantly below the actual number of abductions.²¹



Children in a village devastated by Boko Haram in Bauchi State, Nigeria.

In North Korea, there are up to 50,000 Christians languishing in labour camps, representing nearly 50 percent of the total detained in such circumstances.²² It is reported that the detainees “face dire living conditions” and that the work they are forced to do is, in many cases, likely to be “for the advancement of North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic programmes”.²³

In Eritrea, reports suggest that there could be more than 1,000 Christian faithful who are unjustly detained. CSW reported that in 2018, 345 church leaders had been arrested without charge and that some of them had been behind bars for up to 23 years.²⁴ A surge in government arrests between May and August 2019 resulted in the detention of an estimated 300 members of unregistered Christian groups. In the weeks and months that followed “there was no information on the whereabouts of the detainees, the conditions under which they were being held, the charges against them, if any, or if they remained in detention.”²⁵

In China, reports suggest that in the 12 months to 31st October 2019, Beijing imprisoned or detained without charge 1,147 Christians for faith-based reasons – 30 percent of the global figure for the number of faithful falsely held against their will. The figure for China was 561 up on the year before

and forms part of a marked deterioration of government treatment towards Christians, with church demolitions, destruction of crosses and other religious symbols and state interference in almost every aspect of Church life from the appointment of bishops to Christian welfare outreach initiatives.²⁶

In Burma, the Chinese-backed United Wa State Army was accused of orchestrating a campaign of terror, targeting Christians under the pretext of combatting “religious extremism”. It was alleged that, starting in 2018, the forces interrogated and detained 100 pastors and forcibly recruited Christian students.²⁷

In Iran, unconfirmed reports of a rise in converts to Christianity were cited as the reason for the Islamic regime’s renewed clampdown on the faithful. In 2018 over the course of one week in the run-up to Christmas, the state was reported to have arrested 114 people – 100 of them Christians, who were accused of “proselytising”.²⁸ Subsequent reports stated that some of them were “beaten”.²⁹ Arrests of Christians reportedly peaked in 2019 on the eve of the 40th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, with specific targeting of faithful belonging to house churches.³⁰

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

The devastating and unprecedented impact of COVID-19 all over the world, not least in countries where persecution of Christians is an acute problem, has had a direct bearing on trends concerning unjust detention. The impact has been mixed. In April 2020, during the height of the lockdown, Sam Brownback, US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, called for the release of prisoners of conscience in numerous countries around the world to prevent the spread of COVID among the prison population.³¹ He specifically highlighted Burma, China and Iran, countries with a much-criticised religious freedom record, not least concerning unjust detention of minorities, including Christians. Indeed, it seems that, early on in the crisis, authoritarian regimes, with a track record of repression of religious practice, “relaxed a crackdown on unofficial

religious groups”,³² not out of choice, but because of the need to prioritise response to the coronavirus emergency. However, as the emergency went on, the evidence suggests the systems of control were reinforced. A case in point is Iran. Cited as an example showing a relaxation in restrictions early on in the pandemic, by the summer Iran had re-imposed its system of surveillance and arrest of Christians. In July 2020, intelligence agents from Iran’s Revolutionary Guard carried out a co-ordinated operation across three cities – Karaj, Malayer and the capital, Tehran – which resulted in the arrest of 12 Christians.³³

Specifically, with reference to unjust detention, three key factors caused the situation to worsen for Christians:

Firstly, the partial or complete shutdown of courts and other legal activities caused further delays for jailed Christians whose cases have been on appeal. In Pakistan for example, on 15th June 2020 the Registrar at the Lahore High Court directed that “in view of the prevailing pandemic situation”, district and sessions courts in the Punjab should take two months’ leave starting the following week. This vacation was in addition to their standard two-month summer break and meant that court activity across the province was due to be interrupted for a total of four months.³⁴ Leading advocate and Member of the Punjab Parliament Khalil Tahir Sandhu, said the decision was a “setback”³⁵ in the search for justice for those he represents. These include many Christians in jail for blasphemy and the families of Christian girls and women who have been abducted and compelled to enter forced marriages and convert to Islam.

Secondly, as church services have moved online in response to the virus and in line with lockdown and other safety precautions, authoritarian governments have increased surveillance and crackdowns on those found to be participating in allegedly illegal activities. Christian persecution watchdog ChinaAid, which has reported evidence of increased targeting of Christians as a result of greater COVID-related surveillance, posted footage of a police raid during a service in Xingguang, in Fujian Province, in the south-east of the country.



Food distribution during the COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan.

Footage of the incident, in May 2020, shows officials “raiding [and] violently dragging out members mid-service.”³⁶ The previous month, reports emerged that in March 2020 police entered the home of Zhao Huaiguo, a pastor in Cili, Hunan Province, and arrested him for “subversion”.³⁷

China can also be cited as an example of a third factor explaining an increase in the persecution of Christians during the pandemic. The crisis has provided persecutors with the opportunity to strike while others’ backs are turned, trying to grapple with the coronavirus emergency. Describing the Xi regime’s policy of renewed crackdown on church groups refusing to cooperate with “sinicisation”, analysts have concluded that the situation for the faithful has suddenly worsened. As one put it: “In a world distracted by pandemic, China’s government is aggressively consolidating dominance over its tens of millions of Christians.”³⁸

In other scenarios, it is non-state actors, with violent intent towards Christians, who have taken full advantage of governments weakened or distracted by the overwhelming problem of the pandemic. Islamist militant groups in core countries provide examples of this. By June 2020, evidence of an increase in attacks in Nigeria was

cited in a letter from UK parliamentarians and charities, calling on the British government to step up action to protect Christians, saying they were increasingly at risk of violence during the pandemic. The letter said that militant members of the Fulani herder community operating in Nigeria’s Middle Belt had been “taking advantage of COVID-19 lockdowns to intensify attacks on villages”³⁹ mainly occupied by Christians. In a three-day wave of attacks in April 2020, Fulani radicals kidnapped 13 Christians in Kaduna State, killed 13 others and caused 1,000 people to flee their homes.⁴⁰ Local tribal chief Rev Ronku Aka said: “This killing is more dangerous than the coronavirus. It is incessant. I am calling the government to have mercy and come to our aid.”⁴¹ Early the following month, Fulani militants struck again in Kaduna, this time in Gonan Rogo village in Gajuru county. A pastor and a missionary were abducted and 17 people were killed including children.

CONCLUSION

As was demonstrated in the 2019 Bishop of Truro review into the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office’s support for persecuted Christians, followers of Jesus Christ make up “by far the most widely

targeted faith religious community”.⁴² Unjust detention of Christians – be it by the state or non-state actors – emerges as a key violation of human rights in a number of the 143 countries where there is significant harassment of faithful according to the Pew Research Center.⁴³ Quite apart from China, Eritrea, Nigeria and Pakistan, the four focal points of this report, unlawful holding of Christians has emerged as a problem in countries as diverse as Syria and North Korea, India and Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Cuba. Given how many minority faith groups are affected by unjust detention, the need to act is paramount and must not be stymied by the challenge of reporting on the scale of the problem. Evidence to show the multiple and diverse motives in holding people falsely against their will – for example, money (ransom), ethnicity or lust – in no way diminishes the part religion so often plays. For too long, religious hatred has been downplayed in accounting for the phenomenon of unjust detention. Unless it is duly recognised, all such faith minorities are at risk, and others too. Indeed, as human-rights activist Lala Robin Daniel put it following the August 2020 Lahore High Court decision in favour of Mohamad Nakash Tahir, the man accused of kidnapping 14-year-old Christian girl Maira Shahbaz: “With this ruling, no Christian girl is safe in Pakistan.”⁴⁴

CHINA

BISHOP JAMES SU ZHIMIN OF BAODING

Despite never having been formally tried or officially sentenced, Bishop James Su Zhimin of Baoding has been in prison for almost a quarter of a century, having been seized in 1996.⁴⁵ Authorities have refused to confirm to his family whether or not he is still alive.

OVERVIEW

Bishop James was no stranger to state detention, as before his arrest in 1996, he had spent more than 25 years, on and off, in prison or forced labour camps for being a “counter-revolutionary”. Bishop James’s crime was refusing to join the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA),⁴⁶ which seeks to control the Church in line with Communist Party policy.

In 1996 Bishop James issued an open letter to the Chinese government calling for religious freedom and respect for basic human rights.⁴⁷ Later that year he was arrested for conducting unregistered religious activities while taking part in a Church procession.

There are unconfirmed reports that the bishop briefly escaped detention before being recaptured in 1997.⁴⁸

His family were not allowed to visit him and authorities refused to say where he was being held. In November 2003, family members found out by chance that he was in hospital in Baoding. While there, Bishop James was surrounded by security guards. This was the last time he was seen in public.⁴⁹

STRUGGLE TO OBTAIN JUSTICE

A January 2015 appeal by members of Bishop James’s family to Politburo member Yu Zhengsheng for his release resulted in them being placed under house arrest for several days.⁵⁰

That September, Catholics in Hebei Province petitioned the Communist Party’s religious affairs oversight body for the then 83-year-old prelate’s release, following President Xi Jinping’s general amnesty for jailed war veterans and elderly prisoners with disabilities to mark the 70th anniversary of World War II ending.⁵¹

The bishop’s nephew Su Tianyou has continued to press authorities for information about his uncle. In 2015 he finally met religious affairs official Guo Wei, who all but stated that Bishop James was still alive, adding that if relations between the Vatican and China improved then it might be possible for him to be released.⁵² But, despite a September 2018 agreement between the Vatican and China regularising the appointment of bishops and creating “the conditions for greater collaboration,”⁵³ Chinese authorities appear to have made no moves towards reviewing Bishop James’s case.

In July 2020, a renewed push by Beijing to get Bishop Francis An Shuxin recognised by the Vatican as Bishop of Baoding sparked fears among diocesan officials that Bishop James might be dead. Government officials refused to confirm whether the prelate was alive or not.⁵⁴ The renewed publicity led to the case being raised at a US congressional hearing on July 30th.⁵⁵

APPEAL

Su Tianyou made a public appeal, in May 2019, for authorities to provide information about his uncle. He said: “His whereabouts are unknown and I don’t even know if he is alive or not. I am upset with tears every time I think of this 87-year-old man. Please pray for him.”⁵⁶

CHINA OTHER CASES

BISHOP AUGUSTINE CUI TAI



On 19th June 2020, 70-year-old Bishop Augustine Cui Tai of Xuanhua was seized by police and taken to an unknown location. He had been staying with relatives since he was released sometime around the Chinese New Year,⁵⁷ having been previously detained at the end of March 2019.⁵⁸ This was the longest period of freedom Bishop Cui had enjoyed since he was first arrested in 2007. Bishop Cui, who is recognised by the Vatican but not the CPA, has been under almost continuous house arrest since then.⁵⁹ He has not been charged or tried. Church sources in the country speculated that his extended period of freedom may have been linked to the country’s COVID-19 lockdown.⁶⁰

FATHER ZHANG GUILIN & FATHER WANG ZHONG



Father Zhang Guilin and Father Wang Zhong of Chongli-Xiwanzi Diocese were detained by authorities on 11th October 2018 and taken to a nearby hotel to study Communist religious policy. Both priests had refused to join the CPA.⁶¹ Fr Wang had previously served three years labour reform for building a church. They were taken to Zhangjiakou, Cangzhou, Shijiazhuang, Baoding and Beijing, where they met various CPA bishops who attempted to get them to join the official church. Father Wang briefly returned to Guyuan for a few days before being placed in custody again. Father Zhang’s parishioners awaited his return, but in the event were told that he had been taken elsewhere. His 80-year-old mother suffered increased blood pressure due to anxiety.⁶² The priests’ current whereabouts are unknown.⁶³

PASTOR WANG YI

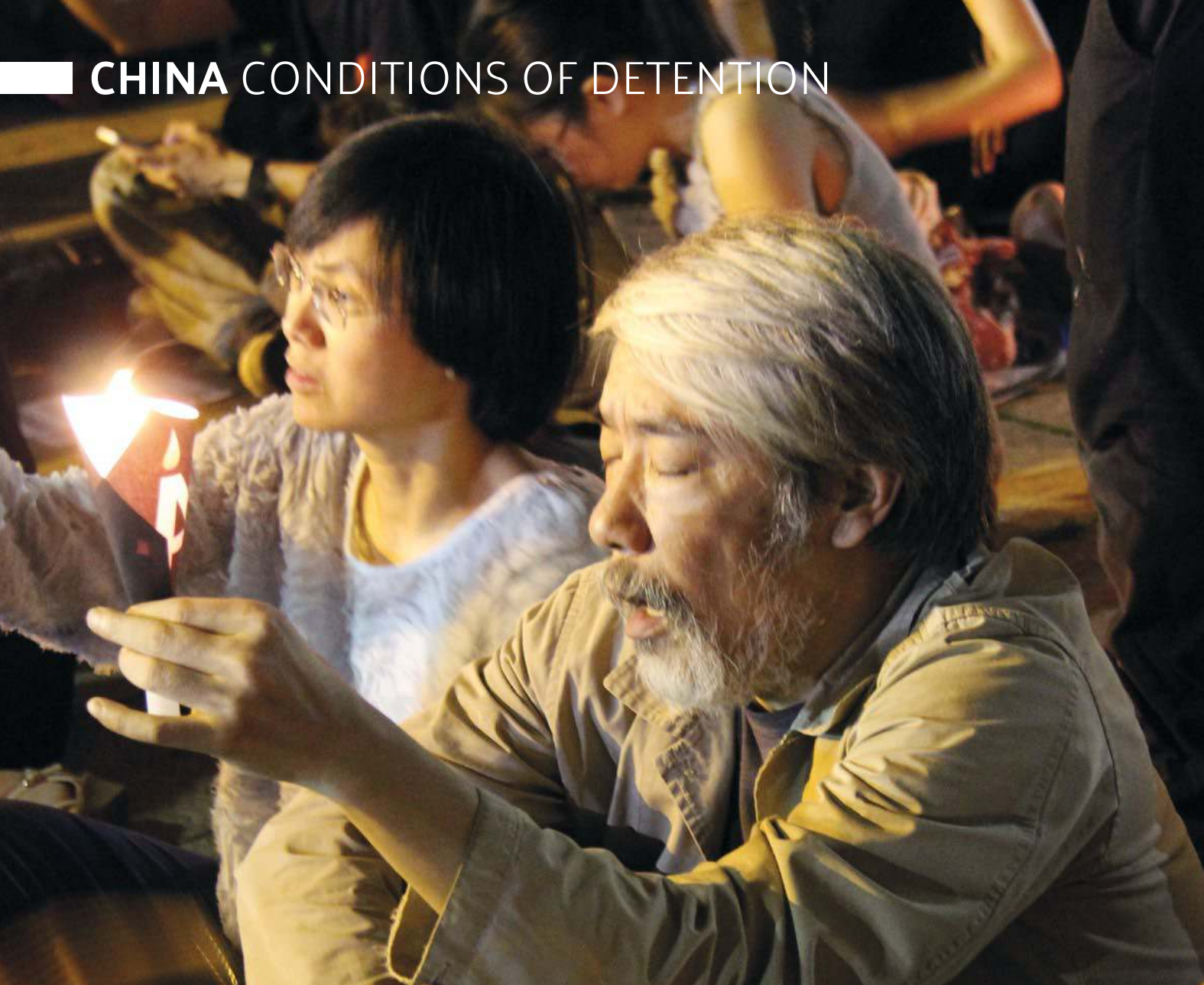


Arrested with around 150 church leaders and seminary students in December 2018,⁶⁴ Pastor Wang Yi was sentenced to nine years in prison for “inciting to subvert state power”⁶⁵ and “illegal business operations.” Pastor Wang led the Early Rain Covenant church, one of China’s best-known unregistered Protestant churches. According to one report, the trigger for the crackdown was a sermon in which Pastor Yi said President Xi Jinping was not God.⁶⁶ Chengdu court also deprived the Christian human-rights attorney turned Presbyterian pastor of his political rights for three years, and ordered that personal property worth ¥50,000 (c. £5,450) be confiscated.⁶⁷

PASTOR ZHANG SHAOJIE



Pastor Zhang Shaojie is currently serving a 12-year prison term for “gathering a crowd to disrupt the public order” and fraud. He was sentenced during a closed court session on 4th July 2014. According to the 2015 report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Pastor Shaojie “was convicted on trumped-up charges”.⁶⁸ Not only was his church – Nanle County Christian Church in Henan Province – state registered, but he was the local head of the government-backed China Christian Council and Three-Self Patriotic Movement.⁶⁹ Since he was imprisoned there have been reports of abuse. In 2017, his daughter Esther Zhang Huixin reported: “They cruelly torture my father. He’s unable to see the sun during the day. He’s deprived of sleep for 24 hours at a time. The prison gives him only one steamed bun a day and intentionally starves him.” She added that former prisoners said he was “barely alive, suffering both mentally and physically.”⁷⁰



China's prisoners who are, essentially, jailed because of their religious beliefs end up in the state's prison system. There are reports of religious prisoners being abused whilst in jail. As noted above, relatives of Pastor Zhang Shaojie revealed that the pastor was subjected to torture including food and sleep deprivation.⁷¹ There are also accounts of human organs being removed from prisoners without their permission, including the case of Christian pro-democracy and human-rights activist Peng Ming whose brain and heart were removed without his family's permission, following his death in Xianning prison, Hubei Province, on 29th November 2016. Family members maintain that he was murdered while in custody.⁷²

Imprisonment often stems from government attempts to bring religious groups into line with Communist party principles. While five religious

communities are "officially" recognised by the state: Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant, adherents must practise under the auspices of one of the state-sanctioned 'patriotic associations': for Catholics this is the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) and for Protestants the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Many worship outside of these official structures in what are often referred to as the 'underground' churches, and ministers of these communities are at particular risk of arbitrary detention. Those detained from these groups are not always placed in the country's prison system; a number are placed under house arrest or even sent to other residential centres – particularly when an element of re-education is involved.⁷³ Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin of Shanghai has been confined to Sheshan Seminary for most of his period of house arrest, which began in 2012.



Abune Antonios, who became Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Tawahedo Church in 2004, has been under house arrest since 2007, but no formal charges have been brought against him.

OVERVIEW

Months after becoming Patriarch in 2004, Abune Antonios' relationship with the Eritrean authorities deteriorated. He "resisted government requests"⁷⁴ to "excommunicate 3,000 members of the Medhane Alem, an Orthodox Sunday School".⁷⁵ "He [also] protested over the secret imprisonment of three Orthodox priests"⁷⁶ and "demanded that the government release imprisoned Christians accused of treason".⁷⁷

On 13th January 2006, Patriarch Antonios was secretly removed from office "for repeatedly objecting to government interference in ecclesiastical affairs".⁷⁸ Pro-government Holy Synod members accused him of "dirty politics".⁷⁹

On 20th January 2007, "two priests, accompanied by three government security agents, entered his home"⁸⁰ and "confiscated" the Patriarch's insignia.⁸¹ Since then, he has been under house arrest.⁸² On 27th May 2007, the Eritrean government installed Bishop Dioscoros of Mendefera as head of the Church. At 5am the following day,⁸³ 28th May 2007, authorities "forcefully removed the Patriarch from his home and [he was] detained at an undisclosed location."⁸⁴ No official charges were made and no sentence was formally passed against him.⁸⁵

Now 93, Patriarch Antonios is "kept in isolation and is not allowed visits, even from family members".⁸⁶ He lives in a church building but is reportedly denied medical care despite suffering "severe diabetes"⁸⁷ and "high blood pressure".⁸⁸

STRUGGLE TO OBTAIN JUSTICE

After the government "replaced"⁸⁹ Abune Antonios, the regime was accused of blocking support for him by seeking "to control"⁹⁰ the Church. Patriarch Antonios's successor, Abune Dioscoros, died in December 2015 and eventually, Yoftahe Dimetros,⁹¹ a "government-affiliated"⁹² layman, became leader. Among those calling for Patriarch Antonios' release is the North America Archdiocese of the Eritrean Orthodox Church,⁹³ which has held demonstrations.⁹⁴ On 17th July 2017 Abune Antonios made his first "brief public appearance"⁹⁵ since his arrest but analysts called it "a [government] ruse to offset international criticism".⁹⁶

In a video in April 2019 Patriarch Antonios said fellow Eritrean Orthodox had abandoned him and had no concern for his welfare.⁹⁷ The Patriarch also spoke out against the layman leading the Church and condemned the synod for judging him "without listening to my side".⁹⁸ Three months later, the Church excommunicated⁹⁹ him. In a letter signed by five of the six "most powerful"¹⁰⁰ bishops in the country, the Patriarch is accused of "blind heresy".¹⁰¹

APPEAL

Eritrean Orthodox Bishop Abune Makarios of the USA, who did not sign the excommunication letter, stated in summer 2019: "It is only by the grace of God that Patriarch Abune Antonios has survived such a long and inhuman treatment... the Pontiff of one of the most ancient faiths remains the most prominent prisoner of conscience of the world."¹⁰²

ERITREA OTHER CASES

TWEN THEODROS



Engineering graduate Twen Theodros was part of a Catholic renewal group in 2004 when she was arrested in the Eritrean capital, Asmara. She was freed after her father persuaded her to sign a document agreeing not to “meet other Christians or engage in Christian activities”.¹⁰³ Still in her early 20s,¹⁰⁴ she was re-arrested in January 2005 for taking part in a Christian New Year Vigil and was sent to Mai Serwa prison. There, she and other Christian women refused to sign papers saying they would not practise Christianity. They were sent to Wi’a prison, infamous for extreme heat and poor sanitation. When 50 Christian prisoners died there,¹⁰⁵ the prison was closed and Twen was transferred to a prison near Asmara, where conditions are better.

150 EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS



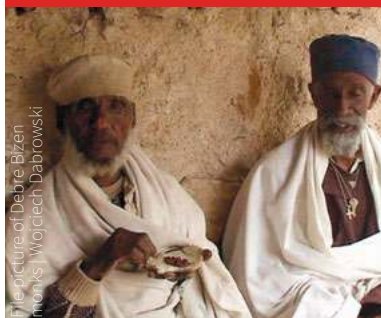
About 150 Christians were rounded up in two waves of arrests over the summer of 2019.

The first group of 70 were arrested in Keren on 23rd June 2019¹⁰⁶ and were taken to Ashufera, a prison about 15 miles away, where they were committed to hard labour, digging underground tunnels.

They belonged to the Faith Mission Church of Christ, the last church still open in their city of Keren.

Running for 60 years, the church had been seeking government registration since 2002. In summer 2019, it was closed down as was its adjacent school.¹⁰⁷ On 18th August 2019, 80 more Christians were arrested in Godayef, near Asmara,¹⁰⁸ and were taken to a nearby prison before “disappearing”.¹⁰⁹

MONKS FROM DEBRE BIZEN MONASTERY



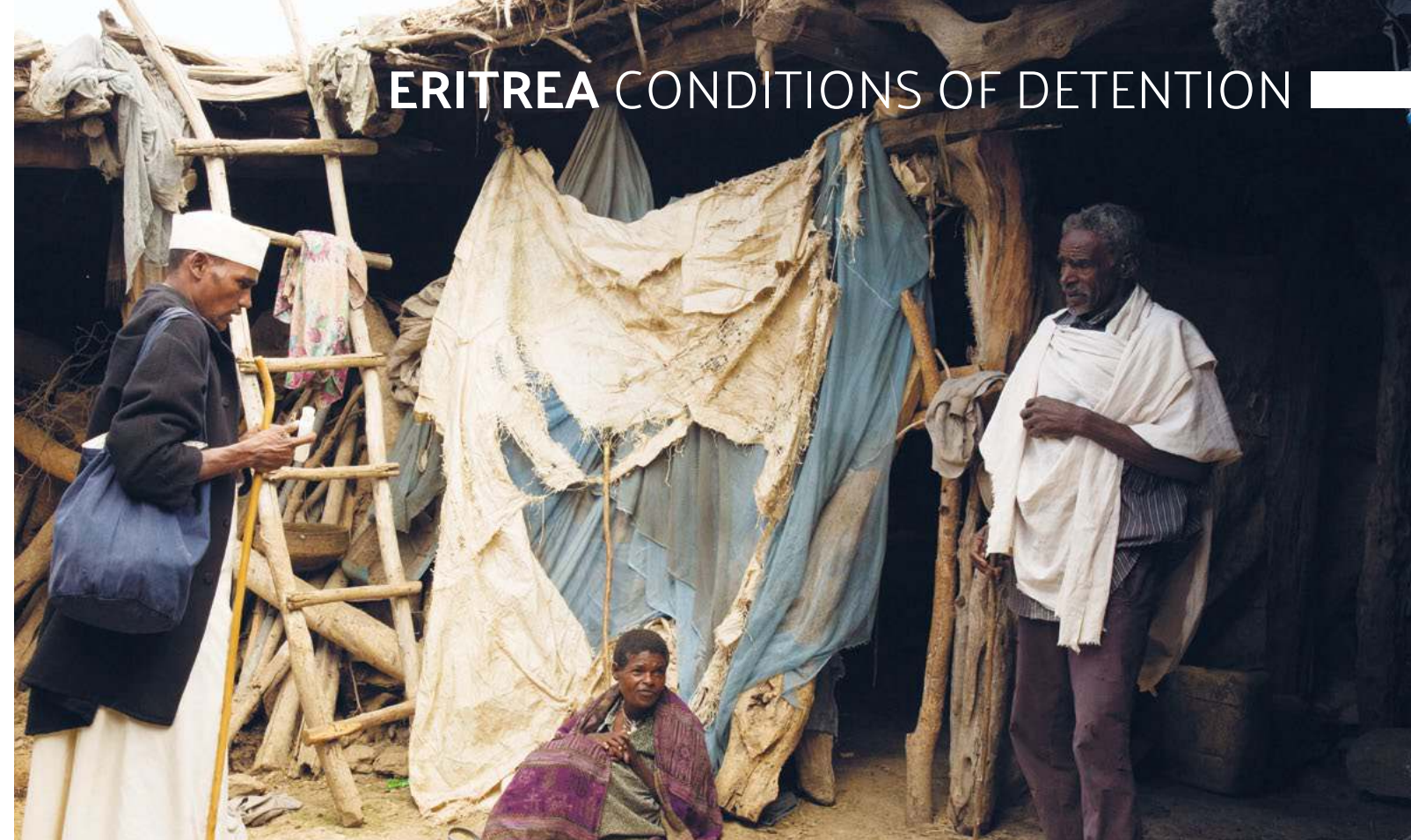
Five monks – three of them over 70 – were arrested on 13th June 2019 and held without charge after security guards entered their mountain-top monastery.¹¹⁰ The Eritrean Orthodox clergy – Aba Kibreab Tekie, Aba Gebremedhin, Aba Kidanemariam Tekeste, Aba Gebretensae Zemichael and Aba Gebretensae Tewoldmedhin – were taken from Debre Bizen Monastery and held without charge about six miles away¹¹¹ in Nefacit, a town in the Northern Red Sea region of Eritrea. Reports were divided on the precise reason for the arrests, with some saying the cause is “unknown”,¹¹² although the monks were said to oppose government interference in Church affairs.¹¹³ More monks were later imprisoned for expressing “disagreement with the excommunication of Patriarch Antonios”.¹¹⁴

33 CHRISTIAN WOMEN



Thirty-three Christian women, many of them young mothers, were arrested in a series of raids, according to local sources, and sent to a “notoriously harsh prison”¹¹⁵ island off the Eritrean coast. The women, who belonged to churches not sanctioned by the state, were among up to 170 people reportedly rounded up by the military in early summer 2017.¹¹⁶ The arrests meant 50 children¹¹⁷ were reported to be without parental care as many of the women had been bringing up their young without support from the fathers, a number of whom had been conscripted into the military or were working away from home.

ERITREA CONDITIONS OF DETENTION



Evangelical Christian Helen Berhane’s account of her 32-month incarceration in Eritrea has put an international spotlight on the scale of human-rights abuses in the country. Helen Berhane described how she was arrested for her Christian faith and was subjected to torture. Detained in Mai Serwa military camp, north of the capital, Asmara, “she was forced to endure confinement in a metal shipping container in sweltering heat without ventilation, light or sanitation.”¹¹⁸

Helen’s account, given after her release in 2006, is corroborated by other reports from NGOs, religious persecution charities and human-rights organisations, which highlight the “notorious”¹¹⁹ prison conditions faced by prisoners of conscience, including people of faith.

The government recognises four officially registered groups, the Eritrean Orthodox Tawahedo Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea.

The 13-year detention of Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios and the arrest of other senior church figures demonstrates that leaders and followers of state-sanctioned faith groups are

by no means immune from arbitrary detention, frequently without charge.

Members of other faiths are routinely arrested, harassed, beaten, repeatedly asked to deny their faith and subjected to incarceration across more than 300 sites¹²⁰ all over Eritrea. As well as shipping containers, these detention centres include “underground cells and the open air in the desert. Access to medical attention is insufficient and often withheld as punishment.”¹²¹ Nearly 350 church leaders and more than 1,000 Christian lay faithful¹²² are imprisoned in Eritrea.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has spread, concerns about the prisoners welfare have grown, especially as many are held in densely packed centres.¹²³

Following a mass confiscation of more than 20 Catholic-run medical centres, including hospitals, clinics and surgeries, in summer 2019,¹²⁴ Isaias Afwerki’s regime is reported to have tightened its clampdown on Christians, with increasing suspicion towards state-sanctioned church groups. Arrests of Christian groups attending house church services were recorded in April and June 2020 – with a total of 45 people detained.¹²⁵

NIGERIA

LEAH SHARIBU

One of more than 100 schoolgirls abducted by Boko Haram in February 2018,¹²⁶ Leah Sharibu was the only Christian among the kidnapped students and the only captive not to be subsequently released – because she refused to renounce her Faith as the price of her freedom. On 14th May 2020, Leah turned 17, having been in captivity for 814 days.

OVERVIEW

On the morning of Monday 19th February 2018, Boko Haram attacked the Government Science and Technical College in Dapchi, Yobe State, seizing 110 students.¹²⁷ According to reports, security forces received advance warning, but failed to act.¹²⁸

On Wednesday 21st March 2018, most students were returned to Dapchi by the extremists, following negotiations with the government.¹²⁹ Leah's mother, Rebecca Sharibu, could not find her daughter among the freed schoolgirls and was told by two of Leah's friends who were also abducted, that:

Boko Haram told Leah to accept Islam and she refused. So they said she would not come with us and she should go and sit back down with three other girls they had there. We begged her to just recite the Islamic declaration and put the hijab on and get into the vehicle, but she said it was not her faith, so why should she say it was? If they want to kill her, they can go ahead, but she won't say she is a Muslim.¹³⁰

During her captivity Leah and two classmates managed to escape. After walking for three days, they asked a Fulani nomad family for help returning to Dapchi – but the family took them back to their Boko Haram captors.¹³¹

STRUGGLE TO OBTAIN JUSTICE

In October 2018 a ransom demand – and a threat to kill her if it was not met – was issued, just two months after an audio recording of Leah begging to be set free was released.¹³² The federal government prepared to pay Leah's ransom, but Boko Haram withdrew the offer when they started setting up arrangements to hand over the money.¹³³

Rebecca Sharibu has been critical of President Muhammadu Buhari, saying that he has not taken her daughter's release seriously enough, citing a lack of communication between the federal government and the family. Speaking to one of Nigeria's newspapers she said: "They have promised us and they promised the whole nation that Leah will be back, but it has been empty promises."¹³⁴

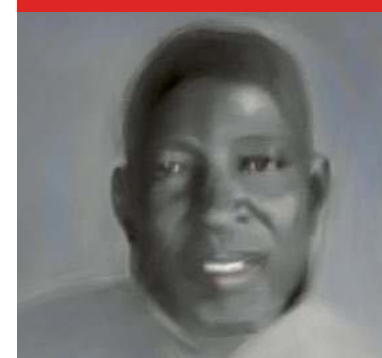
Following numerous false reports, which included 'news' of her release and death,¹³⁵ accounts emerged in January 2020 that she had given birth, having been forced to convert to Islam and marry a Boko Haram commander.¹³⁶

APPEAL

Calling on UK politicians to intervene in the case as part of the Set Your Captives Free campaign, Rebecca Sharibu said: **"I am once again pleading with the UK government, like I earlier did this year when my daughter turned 17 after two years in captivity. Please help me and my daughter: secure her release. Thank you"**

NIGERIA OTHER CASES

REV LAWAN ANDIMI



Rev Lawan Andimi – chairman of the Adamawa State chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria – was abducted on 2nd January 2020 when Boko Haram attacked Michika town. Three days later, the extremists released a video in which Rev Andimi pleaded with authorities to work for his release but told his wife and seven children not to worry.¹³⁷ The Church of the Brethren minister said: "I have never been discouraged, because all conditions that one finds himself is in the hands of God."¹³⁸ He added: "By the grace of God, I will be together with my wife and children. If the opportunity is not granted, maybe it is the will of God".¹³⁹ On 20th January 2020, Rev Andimi was killed by Abubakar Shekau's faction of Boko Haram.¹⁴⁰

ALICE NGADDAH



Christian nurse Alice Ngaddah was seized by Abubakar Shekau's faction of Boko Haram, along with colleagues working at an internally displaced persons' camp including midwife Huawa Mohammed Liman, on 1st March 2018 when the Islamists hit Rann, Borno state. Alice's mother died of trauma two months after her abduction.¹⁴¹ After killing Huawa Mohammed Liman in October 2018, the extremists said of Alice and fellow captive Leah Sharibu: "It is now lawful for us to do whatever we want with them."¹⁴² In January 2020, former Boko Haram captive Jennifer Ukambong Samuel reported that Alice was still alive and had accepted her fate as a captive, adding she was now providing basic medical treatment for injured members of the Islamist group.¹⁴³

MICHAEL NNADI



On the evening of Wednesday 8th January 2020, four Catholic seminarians, including 18-year-old Michael Nnadi, were kidnapped from the Good Shepherd Major Seminary, Kaduna.¹⁴⁴ The other three students were eventually released but, on February 3rd 2020, it was announced that Michael had been killed by his abductors.¹⁴⁵ One of his kidnappers, Mustapha Mohammed, who was later arrested and jailed, confessed to the murder, adding that he killed the seminarian for "preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ" while being held. Speaking at his funeral, Bishop Matthew Kukah of Sokoto said: "For us Christians, this death is a metaphor for the fate of all Christians in Nigeria, but especially northern Nigeria. For us Christians, it would seem safe to say that we are all marked men and women today."¹⁴⁶

BITRUS TARFA



Boko Haram fell on Garkida town, Adamawa State on 21st February 2020, destroying buildings including three churches.¹⁴⁷ Bitrus Tarfa, who worked at Mason Technical School, accompanied the school principal to retrieve some items from the college – not knowing that area had already been overrun by Boko Haram. Militants dressed in army uniforms beckoned the two men: Bitrus went over and was interrogated by them. According to the school principal who managed to get away, upon hearing Bitrus was a Christian they said they would make him a Muslim teacher. Bitrus's uncle, Tawhi, said: "There has been no word from him since then."¹⁴⁸ He added that they had called his mobile several times each day since he was taken away, once it was answered and "we heard a hoarse voice speaking at the other end in a language resembling Kanuri or Shuwa."¹⁴⁹



The Sambisa Forest has been a hideout for Boko Haram since at least 2014.¹⁵⁰ Many of their prisoners have been held at bases within the former game reserve, including the Chibok girls – of whom, more than six years on, over one-third of the 276 schoolgirls seized in April 2014 still remain unaccounted for.¹⁵¹ A number of young women are being held by the group, including Grace Tuka and Lilian Daniel Gyang, a Zoology student from the University of Maiduguri, who was seized in January 2020.¹⁵² Lilian’s fellow student Daciya Dalep – who was kidnapped with her – was executed, reportedly by an eight-year-old jihadist. Exact figures for those seized by the group or being held in Sambisa Forest are not available, but UNICEF calculated that between 2013 and 2018 Boko Haram kidnapped more than 1,000 minors.¹⁵³

A young woman named Ruth, who was captured by Abu Musab al-Barnawi’s faction of Boko

Haram and forced to convert to Islam, spoke in 2018 about her experience of being held captive in one of the militia group’s Sambisa forest bases – the same one where Leah Shaibu was being detained.¹⁵⁴ Shown a picture of Leah, she said: “She refused to convert to Islam in the camp. There is a small wall separating us; so we interacted well but when a ‘soldier’ was approaching, our interaction would be disrupted. She told us to continue praying and she led us in prayers. She told us that she and others were kidnapped from Dapchi in Yobe State.” Ruth added: “Since she refused to convert, the soldiers told us that she was an infidel and that she should not be allowed to cook for us. Leah never attended the Islamic lesson.” Describing the camp she was held in, Ruth said: “It was like a resort taken over by Boko Haram. The place, according to what I learnt, was where Nigerian government kept arms before it was taken.”¹⁵⁵



Maira Shahbaz was just 14, when she was kidnapped at gunpoint, filmed being raped, forced to renounce her Christian faith and enter into a sham marriage. After escaping captivity, she has been in hiding following death threats.

OVERVIEW

Maira Shahbaz was walking close to her home in Madina Town, near Faisalabad, Pakistan, at 2pm on 28th April 2020 when a car drew up. CCTV captured¹⁵⁶ three armed men pushing Maira into the vehicle.¹⁵⁷ Two Christians, Parvaiz and Younas Masih,¹⁵⁸ tried to intervene but her abductors “threatened to shoot them”.¹⁵⁹ Firing guns into the air, the kidnappers sped off with Maira. All this happened during the COVID-19 lockdown.

At Faisalabad Magistrates’ Court on 5th May 2020, her abductor Mr Nakash – who was already married with two children – produced a certificate alleging he married Maira in October 2019. Although the family’s lawyer, Khalil Tahir Sandhu, produced a birth certificate showing Maira was 14 when she was abducted,¹⁶⁰ Mr Nakash insisted Maira was 19. The court ruled in favour of Mr Nakash, leading to Maira’s mother, Nighat, being rushed to hospital with a heart attack.¹⁶¹ Nighat later told ACN: “I beg that my daughter be returned to us. I am frightened I will never see her again.”¹⁶²

STRUGGLE TO OBTAIN JUSTICE

On 23rd July Faisalabad District and Sessions Court, acting on evidence from the national birth registry, ordered that Maira be placed in a refuge.¹⁶³ Despite new evidence of Maira being underage, and a fatwah from the imam invalidating the marriage service he had allegedly conducted,¹⁶⁴ on 4th August 2020, Lahore High Court again ruled in favour of Mr Nakash.

Maira made a dramatic night-time escape from Mr Nakash’s house and, on 18th August, told police he had drugged her, forced her to abandon Christianity, raped her repeatedly and recorded it to blackmail her.¹⁶⁵

The family’s lawyer filed for Mr Nakash to be arrested on child sex charges, and for her marriage and religious conversion to be nullified. Mr Nakash counter-filed an allegation that Maira’s family had kidnapped her.¹⁶⁶

Following a petition in the Rawalpindi Bench of the Lahore High Court on 28th August, police were instructed to provide security for Maira and investigate the video being used to blackmail her.¹⁶⁷

Maira said Mr Nakash had threatened to kill her and her family. At the time of writing, they are in hiding, fearing for their lives.¹⁶⁸

APPEAL

Khalil Tahir Sandhu, who acted in court for Maira’s family, condemned Mr Nakash and his accomplices, saying: “What Mr Nakash and his accomplices have done is clearly against the law; they carried out an abduction at gunpoint, a marriage of a minor took place, no permission from her mother was sought, no permission from his first wife was given and he produced before the court a marriage certificate he knew to be fake.” He added: “The people who do this kind of thing to a young child like Maira treat us not as human beings but as if we’re animals.”¹⁶⁹

IMRAN MASIH



Imran Masih was jailed for life for blasphemy in 2010¹⁷⁰ and in the decade that followed, his lawyer said that his high court appeal hearing had been postponed 70 times. The Christian man was clearing out his shop in Hajveri Town, Faisalabad, in July 2009, when witnesses, including neighbouring shop keeper Hajji Liaquat Ali,¹⁷¹ alleged he set fire to a book with Quranic script. Mr Masih's lawyer, Khalil Tahir Sandhu, told ACN that the case against him was weakened by "substantial contradictions"¹⁷² in eyewitness statements concerning the date and time of the alleged incident and whether or not they were capable of reading the Arabic script reportedly containing the Quranic verses. Reporting repeated delays in an appeal hearing at Lahore High Court, Mr Sandhu said justices were fearful of a hostile reaction from Islamist mobs determined to punish those – especially from religious minorities – accused of blasphemy.

HUMA YOUNUS



A man in Pakistan stands accused of kidnapping Christian girl Huma Younus when she was just 14, forcing her to marry him and change her religion. Huma was reportedly kidnapped on 10th October 2019 from her home in Karachi.¹⁷³ Alleged abductor Abdul Jabbar texted her parents confirming "she had converted to Islam and married [him] 'of her own free will'".¹⁷⁴ The family took the case to Sindh High Court, with help from ACN. Despite receiving "intimidatory messages",¹⁷⁵ they produced evidence showing Huma is a minor, including birth and baptismal certificates. According to Huma's attorney, the court ruled that – in line with *Shari'a* law – such unions are valid, provided the girl has had her first period. Huma's family remain determined to get her back from her abductor.

SADAF MASIH (KHAN)



Sadaf Masih (Khan), a 13-year-old Christian girl from Wichra Bangla, Bahawalpur, in Punjab was kidnapped and forcibly married to a man who has since pressurised her into aborting three babies. Eight days after her abduction in February 2019, the perpetrators, led by Muhabashir Hussain, told the girl's family that she had embraced Islam¹⁷⁶ and produced a marriage certificate.¹⁷⁷ The certificate gave Sadaf's age as 18 but her family produced school and church certificates showing she was 13.¹⁷⁸ The kidnappers said that, if the family tried to contact Sadaf, there would be "consequences of the law".¹⁷⁹

Sources close to Sadaf say she has been forced to have an abortion three times because her husband did not want a child of her caste. The girl also said her husband segregates her in one room apart from the rest of the household and forces her to work in a field outside. Sadaf's parents have gone to court to seek the return of their daughter but without success.¹⁸⁰

SHEHZAD MASIH



Hospital cleaner Shehzad Masih, 16, was sentenced to death after a colleague with Islamist political links accused him of making blasphemous comments about the Muslim Prophet Mohammad. Ishtiag Qadri Jalali claimed the Christian teenager used "abusive words"¹⁸¹ in June 2017 at Shahmim Riaz Hospital, Dinga, where they both worked. Hospital management calmed the situation. When Mr Qadri Jalali, a member of the Tahreek-e-Tuhafaz Islam Pakistan party,¹⁸² spoke with Shehzad to discuss the matter a few days later, the teenager allegedly repeated the offensive words "under pressure of severe threats"¹⁸³ from a mob.

The boy's father, Shafaqat, tried to intervene but the police were called and Shehzad was charged. His mother, Hina, said: "I have raised Shehzad as a devout Christian. I have never taught my son to hate people of other religions [and] I'm sure the charges against him are false".¹⁸⁴

Human-rights observers have repeatedly raised concerns about the unjust detention of Christians and other faith minorities in Pakistan.¹⁸⁵ That Christians are particularly susceptible to being held under false or dubious pretences is the result of injustices involving both the state (police and judiciary) and non-state actors (groups and individuals hostile to minority faith communities).

With regard to the state, institutional misuse of Pakistan's blasphemy laws results in a disproportionate number of Christians being accused of crimes where the evidence against them is weak. Article 295B of the Pakistan Penal Code imposes a life sentence for offences relating to defiling the *Qur'an*. Under 295C, defaming the name of the Prophet of Islam is a capital offence.¹⁸⁶ To date, no such sentence of execution has been carried out.¹⁸⁷ As was seen in the case of Christian woman Asia Bibi, a 295C conviction in effect results in long-term imprisonment (although in her case after 10 years behind bars she was acquitted by the Supreme Court of Pakistan).¹⁸⁸

In the 30 years since the laws were amended to become what they are today, the Catholic (National) Commission for Justice and Peace, an organisation in Pakistan supported by ACN, has recorded details of 1,560 victims of blasphemy allegations.¹⁸⁹ A breakdown of the individuals, according to religion, demonstrates the degree to which faith minority groups are disproportionately targeted. Majority Muslims, who are 95 percent of the population, make up only 50 percent of blasphemy cases (777 individuals). Minorities, notably Ahmadis, make up the rest. With 232 victims, Christians account for 15 percent of cases, even though they represent less than 1.5 percent of the population.¹⁹⁰

The much-reported bias against Christians in the courtrooms is part of societal pressure in which hard-line Muslims take the law into their own hands,¹⁹¹ ransacking homes and buildings, and not infrequently forcing Christians accused of blasphemy to go into hiding.

For Christian girls and young women, there is a secondary threat of detention that comes



Pakistan's Christians have suffered from attacks – including this one on Joseph Colony in 2013, triggered by an accusation of blasphemy.

from a very different source – predatory men. The Muslim Movement for Solidarity and Peace calculates that every year up to 1,000 young Christian and Hindu girls aged between 12 and 25 are abducted by Muslim men.¹⁹² Finding that Christian girls make up 70 percent of these cases, the study concludes that the scale of the problem "is likely to be much greater as a number of cases are never reported or do not progress through the law enforcement and legal systems".¹⁹³

Many of these girls are subjected to rape, forced prostitution, human trafficking and domestic abuse.¹⁹⁴ While in some cases the families succeed in freeing their girls through the courts, frequently the courts favour the abductor, especially in cases where the girl's precise age is in question. Judges are also accused of a hard-line Muslim bias, attaching more credibility and importance to evidence of the girl's alleged conversion to Islam than to enforcement of the law which forbids marriage to a minor.

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