



Iran – Christian convert freed after nearly five years in Evin Prison

Praise the Lord that your prayers for Iranian Christian convert Naser Navard Goltapeh have been heard. Naser has now been released from the notorious Evin Prison in Tehran.

Naser, 61, served nearly five years of a ten-year sentence for “acting against national security with the intention to overthrow the regime”. He was told on 17 October that he had been pardoned, and he has now returned home.

His conviction was a result of his alleged links to churches and Christian groups outside Iran, as well as his role in running a “house church”.

Naser was arrested during a police raid on a church meeting in July 2017, and began his prison sentence in January the following year. His subsequent requests for a retrial were dismissed four times by the Iranian authorities. His latest rejection was highlighted in *Prayer Focus Update*, April 2022.

Evin Prison has an appalling reputation for mistreatment, abuse and even torture of prisoners. Naser’s family have said that he was kept in solitary confinement for two months while undergoing gruelling interrogation. It is not known whether the release of Naser was linked to the fire that killed at least eight people and injured dozens more at Evin Prison on 15 October. None of the Christian prisoners at Evin were reported to have been harmed in the blaze.

Farsi (Persian)-speaking Christians, like Naser, are converts from Islam and therefore punishable as apostates according to Islamic law. Unlike the historic Armenian- and Assyrian-speaking Christian communities they are not permitted to hold church

services or worship freely.

Give thanks for answered prayer in the release of Naser Navard Goltapeh, and ask that God will restore him after his long ordeal (1 Peter 5:10). Pray that other Christians imprisoned for their faith will also be released, and for the continued safety of all Christians in Iran, especially during this period of tension and instability. Ask that the government, and Muslim neighbours, will be moved to seeing Christians as an asset to their society in turbulent times (Matthew 5:16).

India – Anti-conversion law passed in Karnataka

Pray for the church in Karnataka, India, as the state has now passed its long-expected anti-conversion law. The law criminalises religious conversions solicited through force, fraud or allurements, but can be interpreted in such a way that genuine evangelism and missionary work is also criminalised. Extremists often use the law as a means to disrupt any prayer meeting or worship service.

The law, known formally as the Protection of Right to Freedom of Religion Bill, was passed by the upper house of the state legislature on 15 September.

The passing of this law makes permanent the provisions of a temporary anti-conversion ordinance announced in May 2022. The bill had been passed by the lower house in December 2021. However, the governing party did not at that time have a majority in the upper chamber with which to complete the passage of the bill into law.

The law carries a punishment of five years’ imprisonment and a minimum fine of 25,000 rupees (£275; \$315; €315) for those who solicit religious conversions using “force, undue

influence, coercion, allurements or by any fraudulent means” or “by a promise of marriage”. When the intention is to convert a minor, a woman, or a person belonging to the Scheduled Castes (those viewed as having the lowest status according to the Hindu caste system), the offence is punishable with a maximum of ten years in prison and a fine of 50,000 rupees.

Anyone who wishes to change religion must inform the authorities of the reasons for their conversion 30 days before making the change.

Opposition parties and Christian leaders argued that the bill violates Article 25 of the Indian constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion.

Ten other Indian states have introduced similar anti-conversion laws, most recently Haryana in March 2022, but the Karnataka bill is stricter than many comparable laws in other states, with more stringent punishments.

An expanded definition of “allurement” in the Karnataka bill includes not only the promise of cash or the offer of aid in exchange for religious conversion, but suggestions of a “better lifestyle”, that a person faces “divine displeasure”, or that one religion or faith is superior to another. “Allurement” can therefore be interpreted in such a way as to criminalise the Gospel message that repentance and faith in Christ leads to forgiveness of sin and everlasting life.

Intercede for church leaders and all Christians in Karnataka that they may know Divine wisdom in responding to the passing of the anti-conversion law. Ask that their testimony will be so pure and godly that no opponents will be able to resist or contradict (Luke 21:15). Pray that the government’s decision will not lead to increased hostility towards Christians and unfounded accusations of forced conversions.

D. R. Congo – Pastor among 11 killed by Islamists in raid

Lift up our brothers and sisters in the beleaguered north-eastern regions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where Islamist militants have killed 11 people, including a pastor. Militants from the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), which is linked to Islamic State (IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh), raided the village of Vido in North Kivu province on 4 October.

An additional 20 people are unaccounted for following the raid, while local officials said that 25 houses had been burned.

Christian-majority north-eastern DRC has suffered Islamist violence for several years. Two provinces, North Kivu and Ituri, remain under a state of emergency (known as a “state of siege”), which was imposed in May 2021.

In May 2022 at least 24 villagers were killed by ADF terrorists in another area of North Kivu, which borders Uganda. Many have fled across the border to escape ongoing violence (see *Prayer Focus Update*, July 2022). The previous month a church leader in Uganda had reported that Islamists are “mercilessly killing Christians” in north-eastern DRC.

Cry out to the Lord for those who have lost loved ones, and for a congregation that has lost its minister, to be comforted by the Lord. Ask that they will know the comfort of the Good Shepherd and the assurance that He will never leave nor forsake them (Deuteronomy 31:6). Pray that He will bring a swift end to the violence so that our brothers and sisters can live and worship in peace.

Nigeria – Anti-Christian violence continues in Middle Belt

Anti-Christian violence is continuing in Nigeria’s Middle Belt, where Islamists including Fulani extremists persist in targeting Christian-majority villages and tribal areas.

Gunmen launched an armed assault on a church service in Kogi State on Sunday 16 October, killing two worshippers and wounding three others. “Kogi is no longer safe,” said a witness

who survived the attack.

In another incident the previous month, suspected Islamists abducted 43 people from the Kajura area of Kaduna State, the majority of whom were worshippers at a mid-week church service.

President of the Southern Kaduna People’s Union (SOKAPU) Awemi Maisamari commented, “There is still no breathing space for communities in Southern Kaduna. Terrorists, jihadists, bandits and armed herdsmen have continued to plunder and wreck communities.”

He also added SOKAPU’s “profound sympathy to indigenous communities and peaceful Fulani herdsmen affected by this cruelty”.

Meanwhile, the monarch of the Christian-majority Atyp Chiefdom in Nigeria’s Middle Belt, Dominic Yahaya, has revealed that 245 people have been killed and 623 houses razed by suspected Fulani Islamist militants in recent years.

Yahaya said that almost all villages within his chiefdom, in the Zangon Kataf area of Kaduna State, had experienced assaults since 2020. Speaking at a conference in Kaduna, he explained that the terror outbreak began in early 2019 when the first of 14 farmers was killed in separate attacks in the chiefdom.

“This snowballed into a major crisis on 16 June 2020,” Yahaya told the conference. “Thereafter massive attacks have occurred in villages whereby people were killed and houses and properties were burned.” The attacks by Fulani militants happened “in the dead of the night and left many communities desolate”, he added.

The majority – an estimated 84% – of the Atyp people are Christian.

Pray for the safety of the Atyp people and for all Christians across Nigeria’s Middle Belt. Ask that they will be able to rebuild their communities, with strong spiritual as well as structural foundations. Pray for Dominic Yahaya and other Christians to stand firm and receive the Holy Spirit’s counsel (John 14:26). Pray for the release of all those abducted, and that they will be unharmed.

Tanzania – Health Minister welcomes PPE shipped by medical.gives that will aid fight against Covid-19 and ebola

Give thanks that a huge consignment of life-saving personal protective equipment (PPE), donated by the Irish government and shipped by Barnabas Aid’s medical.gives initiative to Tanzania, is being deployed to protect health workers from a deadly new threat.

The consignment, essential in the fight against Covid-19 infections, was welcomed on 29 September by the country’s Health Minister Ummu Mwalimu.

The cost of transporting the equipment to Tanzania and to four other African countries was paid for by medical.gives, working in partnership with historic charity Crown Agents.

The handover came days after Tanzania was put on alert by the minister’s department against ebola, the highly contagious disease that is currently breaking out in parts of East Africa. Ebola claimed more than 11,300 lives in West Africa between 2014 and 2016, and killed 2,280 people in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2018.

Medical masks, gloves, scrubs and other items included in nine 40-foot shipping containers of PPE transported by medical.gives are being issued to health staff working in areas of Tanzania deemed at the highest risk of ebola.

Around 50 million pieces of PPE, worth around £25 million (\$33m; €33m) were donated to Christian hospitals in east and southern Africa by the Irish government. Distribution of the PPE is ongoing in Kenya and Zambia and is about to commence in Zimbabwe. The equipment is currently on its way to Uganda.

Praise God for His perfect timing in providing PPE to combat the threat of ebola in Tanzania as well as the ongoing challenge of Covid-19. Pray that the country will succeed in preventing an ebola outbreak. Ask for guidance for health teams in other affected countries, that they will halt further spread of the disease, and for continued health for medical staff serving in Christian hospitals.

“The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me.” – Psalm 28:7

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