

Your insight into religious freedom

**CSW** everyone  
free to believe

# response & prayer diary

October 2024

**North Korea:  
We cannot look away**

**Also inside this issue:**

**Cuba:** The Ladies in White

**China:** A call for the release of Elder Zhang Chunlei  
and more...



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## Dear friends

**Welcome to the latest edition of your evolving Response and Prayer Diary! Thank you to everyone who took the time to complete the survey we sent with your summer copy, I hope you like the changes we have made so far.**

I am particularly pleased to share with you our lead story that draws attention to the deplorable human rights situation in North Korea. CSW has worked on the country for more than twenty years and our latest report suggests there has been little improvement during that time. If anything, we would say that things have worsened – particularly for the tiny minority of Christians in North Korea.

I recently returned from launching our new report in Seoul: *'We cannot look away.'* From closed door meetings with government ministers to national television interviews, there was a profound interest in the work of CSW and a depth of understanding of the need for radical change to bring about freedom and justice. Most importantly I heard from North Korean escapees; stories of brave escapes and epic journeys across China to avoid capture and forced return to North Korea. The time I spent with Jun (a young defector) was particularly striking. Against the backdrop of growing up under the oppression of the Kim Jong Un regime, he made a daring escape, spending 10 months traveling through China before eventually being sent as a refugee to South Korea. Since arriving he has graduated from university, learnt to speak English fluently and started two businesses. He gives me hope. But, at the same time we know that, just like all those who manage to escape to South Korea, he carries a deep trauma.

Please do read more about our work on North Korea in this issue and join me for the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church on 3 November. I will be sharing a short film to help you pray for the country. Scan the QR code or visit [csw.org.uk/idop](http://csw.org.uk/idop) to take part.

Thanks as ever for your support and prayers!  
**Scot**



Illustration by Emily Paik

Lead story:  
**North Korea**

# '24 years have passed, and I have not forgotten their faces.'

## Reflecting on CSW's first visit to the North Korea border

**Anna Lee Stangl, Head of Advocacy, remembers CSW's first visit to the North Korea border. Decades later, we haven't stopped calling for change.**

**It was September 2000. It was cool and the leaves were starting to fall in Jilin Province, China. We sat low in the back seat of a car – hats pulled down to obscure our faces – as the vehicle wound up through forested roads.**

Eventually, the driver pulled off the main road and we bumped along over dirt and gravel for another forty minutes or so, finally arriving at a little cabin, all on its own. It seemed an idyllic place, a refuge. And for the four people awaiting us inside, that's exactly what it was.

Over the next few hours, we sat on the floor of the cabin as two women and two men – all North Korean refugees in hiding – told us their stories.

We heard from one young woman, tall and slim, of how she had dedicated her life to the military and adored the

ruling Kim family, until the famine led her to cross the border. It was meant to be a temporary visit – she would find food and money and bring it back – but instead she found a new faith in Christ, supplanting her devotion to Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, and making it impossible for her to return home.

**'She found a new faith in Christ, supplanting her devotion to Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il.'**

We heard from another young woman, with long hair and round, rosy cheeks, who had also made it across the border, in the hopes of leaving North Korea forever – only to be intercepted by a trafficker and sold as a ‘wife’ to a man three times her age. She was held, essentially, as a slave, until our hosts were able to extract her and bring her to temporary safety at the cabin.

Then there were the two young men, who were very small. They looked as if they were barely in their teens, due to severe malnutrition they had suffered through their childhood. They were both orphans from the countryside and saw no future for themselves in North Korea.

All four were waiting in the cabin until our hosts could find a safe route for them to leave China, which, to this day, returns all refugees back to North Korea despite the severe punishments they are likely to face.

### Christians in a nightmarish context

This was CSW’s first very assignment to the China and North Korea border. We would go next to Seoul where we’d meet more refugees (now living in relative safety in South Korea), and Korean human rights organisations documenting and reporting on horrific – almost unbelievable – human rights atrocities occurring on a mass scale inside North Korea.

Within that nightmarish context, we learned that North Koreans discovered to be Christians, and their families to the third generation were singled out for some of the worst treatment, as the Kim dynasty attempted to eradicate any trace of Christianity in North Korea. The visit set in place the foundation of CSW’s work in the decades to come, drawing the world’s attention to the human rights atrocities taking place in North Korea and calling for international action.



Scot Bower at the launch of our 2024 report

### A call to action

In 2007, CSW published ‘A Case to Answer, A Call to Act’ – a landmark report setting out the case for the recognition of violations amounting to crimes against humanity in North Korea. The report called for an urgent

response to address these violations and urged the United Nations to establish a Commission of Inquiry (COI) on North Korea.

In September 2011, CSW helped to create the International Coalition to Stop Crimes against Humanity in North Korea (ICNK), which brought together over 40 human rights organisations from across the world, joining in the call for the COI.

All of this contributed, finally, to the 2013 establishment and mandating of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea).

### ‘No parallel in the world’

In 2014, the COI published what is considered to be the most comprehensive report into human rights violations in North Korea. The report’s findings and recommendations were extensive, concluding that the ‘gravity, scale and nature’ of the violations of human rights in North Korea ‘reveal a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world’.

In the ten years since the publication of the COI report, the situation in North Korea has, tragically, not improved in any measurable way when it comes to human rights – and CSW has not stopped calling for change.

Now, we have launched a major new report: ‘We cannot look away’. The report exposes the continuing crimes against humanity in North Korea, and calls on the international community to take action by ensuring the human rights situation is regularly discussed alongside the nuclear issue and to fully implement the 2014 COI recommendations.

24 years have passed, and I have not forgotten the faces or stories of the young women and young men I met that September afternoon.

I pray for them and for the millions of other North Koreans, in and outside the country, who deserve to live out their lives in freedom, free from fear.

CSW will not be silent until they are.

**Support our advocacy  
on North Korea and  
around the world.**

**Read** ‘We cannot look  
away’ at [csw.org.uk/  
NorthKoreaReport2024](https://csw.org.uk/NorthKoreaReport2024)

**Make a gift towards freedom. Today.**



With your help, we can  
continue to raise awareness  
of religious freedom  
violations through our  
work with journalists,  
human rights defenders,  
and communities in the  
countries we work on.

Week 1: 13-19 October

Tito and Esther are a married couple. They live in the village of Montenegro, Oaxaca State.

On 20 July, the pair were arbitrarily detained by community leaders who claimed that Tito had failed to fulfil his community responsibilities. Our sources explained that the allegation is simply untrue; he has fulfilled many obligations in the past.

In reality, the couple's detention arose because they had filed a complaint about the violations of freedom of religion or belief that they had experienced; they are Protestant Christians in a village where the majority religion is Roman Catholic. Find out more at [csw.org.uk/mexico](https://www.csw.org.uk/mexico)

Tito and Esther with two children and a nephew



Sunday 13 October

Pray for Tito Mariano Méndez and Esther Abigail Pérez Ramírez. While we give thanks that the couple were released three days later, they should never have been detained in the first place.

Monday 14 October

This is not the first time that Tito and Esther have been targeted. In 2020, their house was destroyed in an arson attack shortly after they were threatened by community leaders. Pray that their complaint will be heard by the Oaxaca State Ombudsman's Office, and that action would be taken to stop further attacks.

Tuesday 15 October

Pray a special blessing over Tito and Esther's children today. Last year, the couple pulled their children out of the local school due to the severe mistreatment and discrimination they were experiencing on account of their faith.

Wednesday 16 October

Tito and Esther's case is sadly not unique. In the nearby community of San Isidro Arenal, Protestant Christians have been subjected to discrimination, violence, and arbitrary detention since last year, and are now facing imminent forced displacement from their homes. Ask the God of peace to intervene.

Thursday 17 October

The volatile situation in San Isidro Arenal, Oaxaca State escalated after Protestant families were dispossessed of their lands and livestock on 6 August. Their church was also set on fire. Pray that concrete steps will be taken to protect this religious minority community, and to hold those responsible to account.

Friday 18 October

Mass demonstrations took place on 22 August to protest the serious violations in San Isidro Arenal, Oaxaca. Give thanks for people across Mexico who raise their voices in support of freedom of religion or belief for all. Pray that the Mexican government will hear their voices and take action to uphold the law.

Saturday 19 October

*Holy Lord, your word tells us to 'make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy' (Hebrews 12:14a). We pray that this would become reality in Mexico, and especially in Oaxaca State, that everyone will be able to peacefully follow their religion or belief. Amen.*

Week 2: 20-26 October

On 21 July, Pastor Varghese Chacko was going to a house-warming prayer meeting. It was hosted by one of his church members in Dhamtari, Chhattisgarh State.

After Pastor Chacko arrived, a group of villagers entered the house from the Hindu temple next door – demanding a stop to the prayer meeting. They then called the police to accuse the Christians of illegal conversion.

Police arrived and asked Pastor Chacko to leave, but the villagers had punctured one of his car tyres, so he drove to a nearby mechanic.

However, the group followed Pastor Chacko, stopped his car and began beating him with rods. They then dragged him to another temple nearby and forced him to kneel down and bow his head before a Hindu idol. He managed drive to a friend and doctor's house where he was treated for his wounds.

Please pray for Pastor Chacko, his church, and other religious minority communities in India today. Read more at [csw.org.uk/india](https://www.csw.org.uk/india)

Sunday 20 October

Pastor Chacko was badly beaten, but thankfully the next day's scan at the hospital revealed no internal injuries. Please remember the pastor in prayer, three months on.

Monday 21 October

"You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden." (Matthew 5:14 NLT)

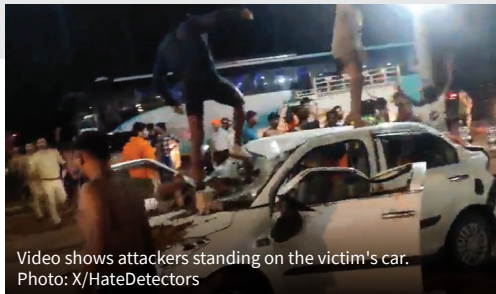
Pray that Jesus' words would inspire and encourage Christian communities like Pastor Chacko's today.

Tuesday 22 October

A Muslim man called Aaqib was attacked on the same day as Pastor Chacko, while travelling between Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh. A group of Hindu pilgrims dragged Aaqib from his car, smashed the windows and tore his clothes, after falsely accusing him of damaging their kanwar (a pot used to carry holy water). Pray for Aaqib and for the safety of India's Muslim communities.

Wednesday 23 October

On 20 August, 18 Christian families were attacked by a large mob in Iradaha, Chhattisgarh State. The families, who are all converts from Hinduism, have



Video shows attackers standing on the victim's car. Photo: X/HateDetectors

faced threats and harassment for the past year, with villagers attempting to force them to return to their religion. Pray for all who were hurt – including children – and that tensions would ease in the village.

Thursday 24 October

These cases paint a small picture of the dangers facing India's religious minority communities. Pray for the perpetrators of such intolerance and violence, as well as those responsible for stirring up division through hate speech.

Friday 25 October

Pray that the Indian government at all levels will do more to counter the religious intolerance, hateful rhetoric, and dangerous spread of extreme religious nationalism across the country.

Saturday 26 October

Father, we pray for Pastor Chacko, Aaqib, the families in Iradaha, and all who have been attacked because of their religion or belief. We pray that victims of similar incidents will not be afraid to report them, and that the police would be swift to intervene. Amen.

Week 3: 27 October-2 November

‘Sudanese people have endured much pain. Their suffering must stop, and their human rights must be protected. This cannot be done without ending the fighting.’

In September, the United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for Sudan published a report which concluded that war crimes and crimes against humanity have been committed in Sudan since the conflict began in April 2023.

Our Sudan team said that it was the strongest report on human rights in the country that they had seen in a decade. Our prayer now is that the international community heeds its calls.

Find out more at [csw.org.uk/sudan](https://csw.org.uk/sudan)

Sunday 27 October

Give thanks for the work of the fact-finding mission, which produced an invaluable report despite being understaffed and not fully operational during its reporting period. Praise God for the renewal of its mandate and pray that it would be sufficiently staffed and resourced going forward.

Monday 28 October

Pray that justice would be served swiftly in relation to the findings of the report, and that those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity would be held accountable.

Tuesday 29 October

The fact-finding mission reported that both warring parties – the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and Sudanese Armed forces (SAF) – are responsible for widespread conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). Pray for the urgent protection of women and girls in Sudan. Pray that those who have experienced these horrific crimes would know God’s healing and peace.

Wednesday 30 October

‘I know that the Lord secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy.’ (Psalm 140:12). We trust in God’s justice today. Pray that those who feel their plight is forgotten would be reminded and reassured that the Lord upholds their cause.

Thursday 31 October

In July this year, the International Organization for Migration reported that over 10 million Sudanese (20% of the population) had been displaced from their homes since the war began. Pray that all who have fled would find shelter and refuge.

Friday 1 November

Continue to pray for a comprehensive and unconditional ceasefire that enables the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance. A ceasefire that ultimately allows Sudan to begin a peaceful, democratic and inclusive transition that centres the voices of youth, women and historically marginalised communities.

Saturday 2 November

*Lord God, thank you for the collective efforts to bring peace, justice and accountability to Sudan. We believe this is your heart for the nation, and ask that we see effective and lasting transformation soon. Amen.*



Women in Sudan

Week 4: 3-9 November

What does ‘church’ look like in North Korea?

There are a small number of churches in Pyongyang, but these exist largely for propaganda. Only a select group is allowed to attend, such as foreigners or those known to be loyal to the regime. In the words of a North Korean defector: ‘*They are fake, totally fake.*’

Our research shows that there is some kind of ‘underground church’, but it is not like other countries. It’s understood that groups operate on a very small scale – a handful of people or even just within families – and a high level of secrecy.

One expert we interviewed said that, from his experience, North Korean Christians are ‘*not waiting for the current regime to blow over and find a more suitable time to be Christian.*’

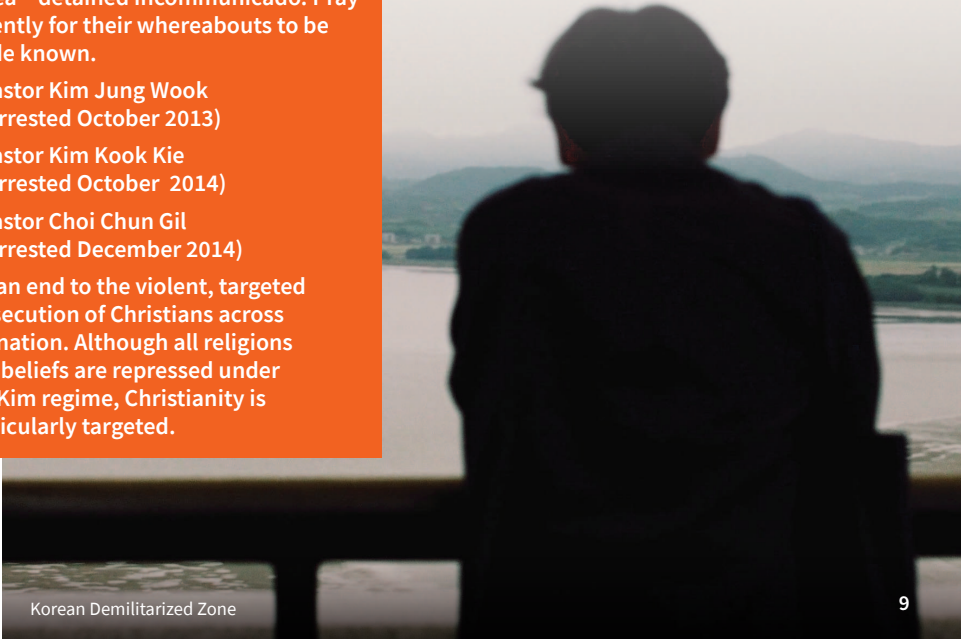
Find out more at [csw.org.uk/NorthKoreaReport2024](https://csw.org.uk/NorthKoreaReport2024)

**Please pray:**

1. For the safety and encouragement of Christians in North Korea, and for those who have managed to escape.
2. That China would stop illegally repatriating North Korean refugees – returning them to certain danger.
3. For the immediate, unconditional release of all currently detained in prison camps.
4. For three South Korean missionaries who are serving life sentences in North Korea – detained incommunicado. Pray urgently for their whereabouts to be made known.
  - Pastor Kim Jung Wook (arrested October 2013)
  - Pastor Kim Kook Kie (arrested October 2014)
  - Pastor Choi Chun Gil (arrested December 2014)
5. For an end to the violent, targeted persecution of Christians across the nation. Although all religions and beliefs are repressed under the Kim regime, Christianity is particularly targeted.

Sunday 3 November: International Day of prayer for the Persecuted Church

Join our online prayer gathering, together with the Evangelical Alliance, Open Doors and Release International. Visit [csw.org.uk/IDOP](https://csw.org.uk/IDOP) to book your free place.



Korean Demilitarized Zone

**Week 5: 10-16 November**

'We are concerned that the remaining Christians will be forced to leave, which would be a big loss for us all.'

In September, the commander of an Islamist militia confiscated 500 acres of land belonging to Christian farmers in Ras Al-Ein in northern Syria. The town is currently under the control of a coalition of these militias, which are supported by the governments of Qatar and Turkey.

In June, an army commander promised to protect the few remaining Christians in the area, but this has not been followed through.

Find out more at [csw.org.uk/syria](http://csw.org.uk/syria)

**Sunday 10 November**

Pray today for Christians in Ras Al-Ein, that their land would be returned to them, and they would no longer face hostility and harassment from the Islamist groups that control the area.

**Monday 11 November**

Pray that the governments of Qatar and Turkey would cut all funding to militias responsible for violence and human rights violations, and that the international community would in turn hold these governments to account for their own complicity in these injustices.

**Tuesday 12 November**

'The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.' (Psalm 34:7)

Pray that Christians in Ras Al-Ein and across Syria would know and see this protection in their lives today.

**Wednesday 13 November**

It has now been more than a decade since the Islamic State declared a caliphate in Syria. The group may have lost control of the territory it once held, but the impact of its atrocities continues to be felt today. Pray for healing and justice.



Commander Al-Sawadi of the Syrian National Army visits the St. Thomas Syriac Orthodox Church in Ras Al-Ein

**Thursday 14 November**

The Syrian government continues to incarcerate thousands of political prisoners, and there are concerning reports of torture in Syrian detention centres. Pray for the release of all who should not be detained, and that the human rights of all prisoners would be respected.

**Friday 15 November**

Above all else there remains an urgent need for a comprehensive ceasefire and a sustainable political solution to the conflict. Pray that God would make a way for this to be achieved, even where the international community may not see one.

**Saturday 16 November**

*Lord God, we thank you that you still rule and reign over Syria. We ask for justice and reconciliation today, that you would remove from positions of influence those set on violence and division, and raise up peacemakers to lead with truth and integrity. Amen.*



Father Frutos Valle Salmerón

**Week 6: 17-23 November**

This summer, Nicaragua saw a renewed crackdown on religious leaders and civil society in particular. President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, seem determined to eradicate all independent or critical voices. Find out more at [csw.org.uk/nicaragua](http://csw.org.uk/nicaragua)

**1. Pray for an end to the targeting of religious leaders.**

Amid a fresh wave of arbitrary detentions, 79-year-old priest Father Frutos Constantino Valle Salmerón was unjustly detained on 26 July. Father Valle Salmerón is diabetic and suffers from hypertension and became seriously ill while in the police vehicle. He remains under house arrest.

Then in August, several other Roman Catholic leaders were arbitrarily detained – most of whom were eventually forced into exile.

**2. Pray for independent civil society, including religious organisations.**

Over 1,800 civil society organisations were forced to close in August, including scores of churches and two of the most historic denominations: the Moravian Church of Nicaragua and the Episcopal Church of Nicaragua (present since 1847 and 1612, respectively).

The Nicaraguan government has now cancelled the legal status of over 5,500 organisations since 2018 – eliminating more than 76% of registered independent civil society. These organisations play a vital role in society, often supporting the most vulnerable.

How many more will be closed before President Ortega is held to account?

Week 7: 24-30 November

The situation of freedom of religion or belief in Laos is poor, with the government heavily monitoring and restricting religious activities.

All religious groups must register with the Ministry of Home Affairs, which is typically slow to respond to requests. They can also arbitrarily approve or revoke the registration of any group.

On top of this, religious groups have to own at least 5,000 square metres of land to construct a legal place of worship. This is rarely possible for small Christian communities and other religious minority groups – often scarcely more than ten people who meet in homes, typically in poorer rural areas. Find out more at [csw.org.uk/laos](https://csw.org.uk/laos)

‘From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the Lord is to be praised.’

(Psalm 113:3)

Laos sunset

Around the world

Around the world: Recent News



Helen Berhane 2024

Eritrea

Helen Berhane – the Eritrean gospel singer, bible teacher, human rights advocate, CSW board member, and former prisoner of conscience – has been insulted and threatened by Canada-based YouTuber, Selemun Syum.

Mr Syum has been harassing Helen for three years. Helen says the harassment began after she spoke out against the use of rape as a weapon of war during the Tigray crisis. Then in September he broadcast a video, ominously encouraging viewers in the Eritrean diaspora to ‘deal with her’.

Among other things, Mr Syum claimed Helen had lied about her imprisonment and torture. This is completely false. CSW worked on Helen’s case from her imprisonment in 2004, until she was granted asylum in Denmark in 2007. Her 32-month ordeal has been confirmed by former prisoners, and documented by several other organisations.

According to our sources, Mr Syum (who says he is a Christian) was granted asylum in Canada along with his family, on the grounds of having fled persecution. However, he has used his YouTube channel to support the Eritrean regime and threaten its opponents since November 2020, when Eritrea joined Ethiopian forces in attacking the Tigray region.

Pakistan

On 12 September a police officer, Syed Khan, fatally shot Abdul Ali while he was in police custody. Mr Ali had been arrested the day before, following accusations that he had made derogatory remarks towards the Prophet Muhammed.

After Mr Ali’s arrest, a mob of residents surrounded the police station. They demanded that the police hand him over to them so that they could kill him. At one point, a man hurled a grenade at the police station, while a group of Islamists briefly blocked a key road in the city, demanding punishment for Mr Ali.

Pakistan’s blasphemy laws remain a dangerous driver of religious extremism in the country. The killing of a suspect in custody is unusual, but highlights the ongoing tensions related to religious offenses. It adds to a troubling pattern of violence against blasphemy suspects in Pakistan.

‘Regardless of the accusations against him, it was the duty of the police to protect him,’ said CSW’s Founder President, Mervyn Thomas. ‘Who will ensure the safety of such victims when the police itself is involved in such acts of violence?’

## Vietnam

On 30 September, a Thai court ruled that it would be lawful for Vietnam to extradite a prominent human rights activist, Y Quynh Bdap. If sent back to Vietnam, he is certain to face torture and brutal conditions.

Mr Bdap is the founder of Montagnards Stand for Justice (MSFJ), which specialises in defending the rights of the Montagnard minority ethnic group. MSFJ methodically reports on the harassment of the Montagnards by the Vietnamese government, which declared MSFJ to be a terrorist organisation earlier this year.

Prior to this, Mr Bdap – along with nearly 100 other members of the Montagnard ethnic group – had been charged in connection to various terrorism-related crimes. In reality, they are being targeted for defending human rights.



Y Quynh Bdap.  
Photo: Facebook Y Quynh Bdap

Since his arrest in June 2024, Mr Bdap has only had visits from his lawyers and translators. He was allowed only a few minutes with his wife at the courthouse before his trial began. They were not allowed to touch, and he has not seen his children since his arrest.

Thai prisons only allow inmates one book a month, so Mr Bdap recently requested a bible in his native language.

## Sudan

Christians in Al Thora Mobe village (a suburb of Wad Madani, Gezira State) have reported being forced to convert to Islam by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which controls the area.

The RSF – one of the warring parties in Sudan's ongoing conflict – has controlled Al Thora Mobe village since December 2023.

The village is in an area with little to no infrastructure, but has been home to Christians who fled the war in the Nuba Mountains in 2011. It has five churches and two Christian schools.

'We live under miserable conditions and lack all basic needs', our source said. They explained that it is also dangerous to flee, as the RSF has

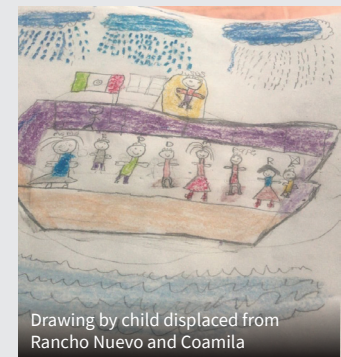
surrounded the village and accuses anyone who tries to leave the area of being affiliated with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF).

The RSF and SAF are responsible for an appalling range of human rights violations. United Nations experts recently reported that some may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

'The gravity of these findings underscores the urgent and immediate action to protect civilians,' said Mohamed Chande Othman, Chair of the UN Fact-Finding Mission for Sudan. 'The people of Sudan deserve a future marked by peace, prosperity, and respect for human rights.'



Families displaced from Rancho Nuevo and Coamila



Drawing by child displaced from Rancho Nuevo and Coamila

## Breakthrough in Mexico

An agreement has been reached in Hidalgo, meaning that over 150 Christians should now be able to return home!

These Protestant families – a minority in their community – have been displaced since April, when they were forced from the villages of Rancho Nuevo and Coamila. They've been relying on local churches for food and had to use river water for bathing and drinking. Many experienced illness and infection as a result, including children and the elderly.

Under the agreement, electricity and water services have been reconnected to the homes of those who were displaced. They have been given a set time period to review the conditions of their homes and land, and have the right to access state programmes for aid, if needed.

**We will be watching to ensure that the promises of the agreement are upheld.**

Week 8: 1-7 December

This year, China was reviewed at the UN Human Rights Council, in a process known as a Universal Periodic Review (UPR). It received 428 recommendations from other countries on how to improve situation of human rights in China, including recommendations to comply with international standards for freedom of religion or belief.

However, the Chinese government rejected a concerning number of recommendations. They claimed that they were based on ‘false information’ or had already been implemented.

We know that this is not the case. Hundreds of thousands of people continue to face harassment, intrusive surveillance, arrest, imprisonment, arbitrary detention and even torture on account of their religion or belief. Find out more at [csw.org.uk/china](https://csw.org.uk/china)

Sunday 1 December

At the UN in July, we called on China to stop misleading the international community by claiming to have ‘already implemented’ certain recommendations. Pray that the international community will not be misled by lies, but will increase pressure on the Chinese government to change.

Monday 2 December

Next Monday is the sixth anniversary of the crackdown on Early Rain Covenant Church, Chengdu. Its leaders and members continue to be subjected to power cuts, threatening phone calls, stalking, and the stationing of police outside their homes – all to deter them from practising their religion. Ask God to guard them, especially around this anniversary.

Tuesday 3 December

Pastor Wang Yi, a leader of Early Rain Covenant Church, was one of those detained on 9 December 2018. Use our Connect & Encourage resource to write to him in prison: [csw.org.uk/ConnectEncourage](https://csw.org.uk/ConnectEncourage)

Wednesday 4 December

Pray for the immediate, unconditional release of Zhang Chunlei, an elder of Love (Ren'ai) Reformed Church in Guiyang. This summer, Elder Zhang was handed a five-year sentence, having been detained for over three and a half years already. Read more on p.26 of Response.



Chang Weiping before and after prison. Photo Chen Zijuan via RFA

Thursday 5 December

Cry out for transformation in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Over one million Uyghurs, Kazakhs and members of other ethnic groups have been detained without charge in ‘re-education camps’ since 2017.

Friday 6 December

Ikram Nurmehmet is a 32-year-old Uyghur filmmaker. In January 2024 he was sentenced to over six years in prison. During the October 2023 trial, Ikram told the court he was tortured into confessing crimes he didn’t commit. Pray for his freedom today.

Saturday 7 December

Human rights lawyer Chang Weiping was released in July, having completed his unjust prison sentence. According to reports, he has been stripped of his lawyer’s license and is under a travel ban. Pray that this will be lifted so that he can be reunited with his wife and son in the United States.

Week 9: 8-14 December

This week we are celebrating our universal human rights and those who tirelessly defend them – often at great personal risk.

The right to freedom of religion or belief is encapsulated by Article 18. It is proudly displayed on the wall of the CSW office – a reminder of the first freedom God gave to humanity, which he calls us to protect, defend and restore. And if this right is being violated, it is more than likely that other human rights are also under threat.

We will not stay silent, and we know you won’t either. Thank you for playing your part!



**Please pray:**

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for the highly gifted, highly determined people who stand up for freedom of religion or belief for all.

You see the sacrifices they’ve made and the dangers they face; threats, imprisonment, harassment, enforced disappearance and other tactics intended to silence them.

Bless, encourage and protect them as they go about their work this week.

Help us to follow their example and take every opportunity to defend the rights of others.

Amen.

Key dates:

9 December

Human Rights Defenders Day

10 December

International Human Rights Day

## Week 10: 15-21 December

Blasphemy accusations are increasing in Pakistan, and so is mob violence. Our hearts are heavy as we remember life after life which has been taken this year, in connection with the country's notorious blasphemy laws.

Lazar Masih (a 73-year-old Christian) was attacked by an extremist mob in Punjab Province on 25 May. He sadly died in hospital a week later.

Then on 20 June Muhammad Ismail, a Muslim man, was shot and killed in the Swat Valley after he was accused of desecrating the Qur'an. Mr Ismail was in police custody when a mob stormed the police station, set fire to it and seized him, after accusations were broadcast over mosque loudspeakers.

Learn more at [csw.org.uk/Pakistan](http://csw.org.uk/Pakistan) and pray for an end to this troubling pattern.



Abdul Ali, Pakistan

### Sunday 15 December

Spend a moment in silence, remembering those who were killed following a deadly accusation of blasphemy, and their loved ones.

### Monday 16 December

Pray that there would be justice for those who have been killed in connection with their religion or belief. Pray for a cultural shift in Pakistan – specifically for an end to the impunity which emboldens people to take blasphemy laws into their own hands.

### Tuesday 17 December

Another case of blasphemy was reported in June – this time against a Christian boy who was overheard arguing with his siblings. He was later arrested, and tensions in the area prompted many Christian families to leave to avoid further escalation. Lift them up in prayer, asking God to keep them safe.

### Wednesday 18 December

Pray for the family of Abdul Ali, who was fatally shot by a police officer on 12

September. He was in police custody in Quetta, Balochistan, having been arrested the day before. Local residents had accused him of making derogatory remarks towards the Prophet Muhammed.

### Thursday 19 December

It was the duty of the police to protect Abdul Ali. Pray that all authorities in Pakistan would act with wisdom, justice, impartiality and integrity.

### Friday 20 December

Pray for an end to the discrimination and harassment of Pakistan's Ahmadiyya community. Over 30 Ahmadi were arrested or detained around the period of Eid, including 13-year-old Faizan Ahmad. They were all later released.

### Saturday 21 December

Lord, hear our prayers for Pakistan – that we would see an end to mob violence; urgent action to curb the misuse of blasphemy laws; and perpetrators brought to justice. Amen.

## Week 11: 22-28 December

Over two thousand years ago, a young father was warned in a dream: 'Get up... take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.' (Matthew 2:13b)

Joseph did as he was told. He took Mary and Jesus to find a place of refuge, not knowing when it would be safe to return home.

As we celebrate Christmas this week – full of hope and joy and celebration – let's not forget this part of the story. Let's remember and pray for those in a similar position today – people fleeing war in Sudan, Myanmar and elsewhere; North Korean refugees in China who are at risk of being forcibly repatriated; Cubans who sadly see no future for themselves in their homeland; and many others displaced around the world.

And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.



Christmas sacred heart cathedral, Pakistan

### Please pray:

**Wonderful Counsellor**, you are unmatched in your guidance and compassion. We lift up those who have fled their homes, under gunfire or airstrikes, hunger or persecution, or many traumatising experiences. Bring healing and strength, we pray. Amen.

**Mighty God**, in your power, put the perpetrators of injustice in their place. Bring an end to the conflicts and oppression which have forced so many from their homes and countries. Amen.

**Everlasting Father**, comfort and provide for those who have lost so much, and whose struggles are not yet over. We pray especially for refugees and asylum seekers who are at risk of being returned to almost certain danger. Surround them with special protection. Amen.

**Prince of Peace**, your kingdom will never pass away. Make a way for peace on earth, even where there seems to be no way. Bring justice, even where this seems impossible. Shine your everlasting light into the darkest places, this Christmastime and always. Amen.

Week 12: 29 December- 4 January

Before we welcome in the new year, let's raise our voices in praise and thanksgiving. While many difficult situations will continue into 2025, we also heard much good news in 2024.

Sunday 29 December

After nearly a year in solitary confinement, Bishop Rolando Álvarez Lagos was released in January 2024. Give thanks that he is no longer serving over 26 years on false charges; no longer in inhumane conditions. However, the bishop was sadly exiled from Nicaragua. Please keep him in your prayers.

Monday 30 December

Reverend Dr Hkalam Samson was also released in 2024. He was initially freed in April, but was taken

away again the very same day for reasons unknown. After three months in a property within the prison grounds, Rev Samson was released once more. Pray for him and many others in Myanmar/Burma who bravely stand against injustice.

Tuesday 31 December

In May, an appeal court in Kano, Nigeria, reduced the excessive prison sentence of Mubarak Bala from 24 years to 5 years. Mr Bala, who is the president of the Nigerian Humanist Association, was arrested in April 2020 after he was accused of insulting Islam on Facebook. Pray for him as he nears the end of his sentence.



Mubarak Bala

Wednesday 1 January

Give thanks that an agreement was reached in Hidalgo, Mexico, which should allow 151 Protestant Christians to return home. The group were forced from their villages (Rancho Nuevo and Coamila) in April 2024 by the religious majority, which is Roman Catholic. Pray that the year ahead brings lasting peace in their community.

Thursday 2 January

In October, the UN Human Rights Council extended the mandate of the fact-finding mission on Sudan. Praise God that this group of experts will be able to continue their vital work, investigating and exposing war crimes and crimes against humanity in Sudan. We pray also for a lasting peace in Sudan and that all perpetrators will be brought to justice.

Friday 3 January

Praise God for the small victories in Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo's case. The UN officially ruled that he is detained arbitrarily, which we hope will put pressure on the Cuban government to free Pastor Lorenzo. He was also allowed some day visits home, and even attended his son's wedding!



Pastor Lorenzo Rosales and family

Saturday 4 January

Read Psalm 145 and celebrate the Lord's abundant goodness! Could you tell one person about the good news you've read in this week's Prayer Diary?

Week 13: 5-11 January

This week, most Christians in Egypt will be celebrating Christmas on 7 January.

On 6 January, many Orthodox Christians will go to church and share a type of bread called 'qurban' which is marked with 12 dots to symbolise the 12 apostles of Christ. After this they will break their fast, having adopted a plant-based diet for 43 days.

There are also smaller numbers of Coptic Catholic and Protestant Christians in Egypt who celebrate Christmas on 25 December.

Egyptian Christians are the largest Christian community in the Middle East, and in recent years they have enjoyed greater freedoms and protection under President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. However, these changes have yet to permeate to wider Egyptian society, where societal hostility often persists.

In Upper Egypt, for example, sectarian tensions frequently spill over into mob violence, often centred on the issue of church construction or renovation, as we saw over this past year.

For example, on 6 January 2024, a temporary church building in Minya Province, Upper Egypt, was destroyed after a local mob set it on fire. It had been built on land belonging to the church, and local Christians had been using it as a place of worship.

Even homes that are newly built or under construction are at risk of being attacked, if perpetrators suspect they may be used for any form of worship.

Find out more at [csw.org.uk/egypt](https://www.csw.org.uk/egypt)



Egypt Coptic crosses

Please pray:

Dear Lord,  
We bring the people of Egypt to you in prayer.

We thank you that Christians in many areas are free to celebrate Christmas and hold services throughout the year – yet we know that in others, celebrations, meetings and church renovations can provoke the ire of local extremists.

Draw near to protect them on this day, and every day. May your presence guard, surround and guide them through the threat of injustice, and may reconciliation and respect for diversity become a reality.

Kyrie Eleison; Lord, have mercy.  
Amen.

Week 14: 12-18 January

Safety and education are fundamental rights. We would all agree that children everywhere should be able to grow up free from fear and with safe schooling. That basic wish is a distant dream for many families in parts of Nigeria, where the risks of kidnapping for ransom, violent attacks from armed militia, forced displacement and restricted access to education are the reality.

Find out more at [csw.org.uk/nigeria](http://csw.org.uk/nigeria)

Sunday 12 January

Thousands of families have been forced to flee their homes after being targeted by armed groups and having had their ancestral lands violently occupied. Pray for the tens of thousands of children growing up in camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and specifically for educational provision for displaced children.

Monday 13 January

Pray today for schools in vulnerable communities, for the protection of children in those communities and that the authorities would prioritise their safety and wellbeing. Pray particularly for the full and speedy implementation of Nigeria's Safe Schools Initiative.

Tuesday 14 January

Lift up Nigerian students in the north and centre of the country, especially female undergraduates who have been targeted by terrorist factions for abduction. Pray for freedom for captives and recovery for released survivors, as well as effective strategies for the protection of students across these regions.

Wednesday 15 January

Today we pray for the 16 children of the Du Merci orphanages who are yet to be returned home. Pray for the children's comfort and wellbeing. Please pray as well for Professor and Mrs Tarfa as they continue their struggle for the return of their children.



Thursday 16 January

Remember in prayer the girls and young women in Shari'a states who are at risk of abduction, forcible conversion and forced marriage. Ask God the Father to release all who have been abducted and bring the perpetrators to justice so that this abhorrent practice would be stopped forever.

Friday 17 January

Today we ask you to pray a special blessing on the CSW team in Nigeria. Pray especially for those on the team who are parents, bringing up incredible children, that God would give them grace, wisdom and great joy!

Saturday 18 January

*Lord Jesus, we pray for all who have been affected by the wave of abductions and attacks in Nigeria. Please comfort those who grieve, and give courage and hope to parents who are longing for the return of their children. As you blessed the children in Mark 10:16, we ask that you would gather the children of Nigeria into your arms and bless them with security and freedom. Amen.*

Week 15: 19-25 January

The Ladies in White, or *Las Damas de Blanco*, are a peaceful protest movement in Cuba.

After church, they walk silently through town to remind the government that they are still awaiting the release of their unjustly detained family members. To prevent this, the Cuban authorities detain members of the group every week during the hours of Sunday Mass.

They might be taken to a Department of State Security facility or a local police station. Or they might be forced to sit, hand-cuffed, inside a police vehicle parked in the sun with the windows rolled up and without access to water. They might be fined.

They might be allowed to leave the detention facility to go home, or they might be driven outside of urban areas and forced to find their own way home from remote locations.

**Pray for the Ladies in White this week, taking a few names each day and asking God to guard their way.**

- Give thanks for their courage and determination.
- Pray that their loved ones would be unconditionally released and returned home.
- Pray that the authorities would end their decades-long crackdown on these women, and would instead pour their resources and efforts into something good.



In Havana:

Berta Soler Fernández  
Gladis Capote Roque  
María Josefa Acon Sardiña  
Marieta Martínez Aguilera  
Yolanda Santana Ayala  
Zenaida Hidalgo Cedeño

In Santa Clara (Villa Clara):

Marbelis González Reyes  
Yaima Elena Pérez López

In Banés (Holguín):

Marexis Luzsao Tamayo  
Yaimara Vargas Arango

In Cárdenas, Colón, Perico, and Unión de Reyes (Matanzas):

Amada Rosa Herrerías Rodríguez  
Asunción Carrillo Hernández  
Caridad Burunate Gómez  
Elsa Osiris Castro Palau  
Julia Silvia González Fundora  
Lazara León Cabrera  
Lazarahy Valido Cambert  
Leticia Ramos Herrería  
Marisol Socorro Fernández  
Maritza Acosta Perdomo  
Mayra García Álvarez  
Mercedes De la Guardia Hernández  
Mercedes de la Caridad Bacallao de la Guardia  
Odalís Hernández Hernández  
Ramona Terrero Batista  
Rebeca Santos Hernández  
Sonia Álvarez Campillo  
Soraya Vicencio Campos  
Yesenia Campillo García  
Yudaixis Pérez Meneses

# The Ladies in White

Every Sunday, between 12.30pm and 1pm, Berta Soler Fernández prepares herself. She is dressed all in white.

Berta and her husband, Ángel Moya Acosta, step outside their home: a square, two storey building painted red, with a light green porch. They have every intention of making their way to a Roman Catholic church in the Miramar section of Havana, Cuba, where they hope to attend Mass and offer up prayers.

But like a dark version of the 1993 movie *Groundhog Day*, Berta relives same Sunday over and over and over again.

Between 12:30pm and 1pm, Berta and Ángel open the door of their home and are met by National Revolutionary Police (NRP) officers and Department of State Security (DSS) agents. Mobs of paramilitary members – some holding signs with offensive and insulting messages – hold up mobile phones as they record the couple's movements.

Instead of going to Mass, the two are forced into DSS cars with private license plates and taken to a National Revolutionary Police station. Sometimes they are taken in the same vehicle; sometimes forced into separate cars.

They are ordered to undergo an intrusive medical examination. They refuse because they have not asked for an examination, and know that they will not be provided with the results anyway. (Those will go to the Department of State Security.)

Berta and Ángel are sent to semi-dark prison cells where they will be held until the following morning. Berta has been released as early as 5:45am, or as late as 11:50am.

This happens every week with small differences:

Some Sundays Berta is given a bed bug infested mattress; other Sundays she is given nothing at all.

**Sometimes Berta is denied water; other times she is only permitted to quench her thirst at the discretion of the prison guards.**

On one occasion, she was forced to disrobe and squat. She refused.

Berta and Ángel on Sunday 3 March 2024.  
Credit: Berta Soler Fernández



**Pray** for the Ladies in White on p.23.

Ángel has been ordered to remove his flip-flops, exposing his feet to the filth of the prison cell floor. On one occasion, a DSS officer ordered guards to knock him down onto the floor. One of the guards pushed his knee into Ángel's back while another bent Ángel's right leg and painfully twisted his ankle. They pulled his arms tight behind his back, causing lacerations and inflammation in his wrists.

Some Sundays, Berta and Ángel are ordered to sign an *Acta de Advertencia* – a kind of pre-arrest warrant – for the future crimes of disrespect, disobedience, and disturbing the public order. They always refuse.

**Berta and Ángel are never allowed a Bible or anything else to read.**

Berta is not alone in experiencing the same series of events every Sunday. There are others like her in Havana, as well as in Matanzas, Villa Clara and Holguín; other women dressed in white, detained through the hours of Sunday morning Mass.

The Ladies in White, or *Las Damas de Blanco*, are a dissident group across Cuba. They have been holding peaceful protests in support of political prisoners since 2003, and Berta and Ángel's home serves as their national headquarters.

For the past 20 years, the Cuban government has invested significant resources – especially in terms of manpower and time – to stop women affiliated with the Ladies in White from stepping inside a church; to prevent them from praying there, and to make sure they are not allowed to participate in the fellowship of Sunday services. The details may change in small ways, but the days are the same.

The Cuban government still erroneously believes that brute force and intimidation can destroy a woman's understanding – rooted in her faith – of what is right and true.

The Cuban government is relentless, but so is Berta.

**By CSW's Head of Advocacy and Americas Team Leader Anna Lee Stangl**

# A call for the release of Elder Zhang Chunlei

**‘In handcuffs, without paper or pen, I rely on others to convey my safety.’ Zhang Chunlei is an elder of Love (Ren’ai) Reformed Church in Guiyang in Guizhou Province. He has been detained by the Chinese authorities for over three and a half years. Presumably by design, his case has proven hard to disentangle, with the charges against him changing on multiple occasions. On 24 July 2024, the elder was sentenced to a total of five years in prison.**

*By CSW’s Press and Public Affairs Officer Ellis Heasley*



Elder Zhang Chunlei. Photo: Facebook/Zhang Chunlei

Elder Zhang’s detention began on 16 March 2021.

Earlier that day, ten Christians from his church had been taken away during a police raid on a privately rented property where they were holding a retreat. Elder Zhang visited the police station to make inquiries, at which point he was detained.

Police officers raided Elder Zhang’s home, as well as those of several other church members. They subsequently accused him and three others of ‘illegally operating as an association’. But while Chen Jianguo, Li Jinzhi and Li Lin were released days later, Elder Zhang has remained in detention ever since.

## ‘Swindling believers’ and ‘inciting subversion’

On 28 March 2021 reports emerged that he had been criminally detained, at this point on suspicion of ‘fraud’. This meant that any time he spent in detention from that date on would count towards any jail term if he was convicted.

On 1 May that same year, Elder Zhang was formally arrested on the fraud charge, having already spent nearly seven weeks in detention. A social media post by his wife later revealed further details – namely that her husband had been accused of ‘not having the status of a state-approved religious clergyman while holding religious gatherings and swindling believers of about 100,000 RMB [11,600 GBP].’

In January 2022, it emerged that the authorities had levelled an additional charge of ‘inciting subversion of state power’ against him.

Elder Zhang reportedly stood trial in November 2022. Then in July 2024, the outcome was finally revealed. The pastor was sentenced to a total of five years in prison, to be served until 16 March 2026 to account for the time already spent in detention.

In a letter shared by his lawyer, Elder Zhang wrote: ‘I firmly deny the charge of fraud. As for inciting subversion of state power, I have no subjective intent. Both of these charges are trumped up, using political framing and economic stigmatization to cover up religious persecution.’

Indeed, targeting religious leaders and believers with financial or political charges has become a common tactic of the Chinese authorities. ‘Fraud’ is often used to undermine a religious leader’s credibility, while ‘inciting subversion’ is typically used as a catch-all to target and imprison dissidents.

As well as for his leadership of an unregistered church, Elder Zhang is likely being targeted for signing a joint statement in 2018, calling on the government to respect the basic freedoms and human rights of religious citizens.

Others who signed the statement have been similarly targeted. Pastor Wang Yi of Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu is currently serving a nine-year prison sentence on unfounded charges. Meanwhile, preacher Li Jie of Covenant Home Church in Linfen was

arrested at a retreat in August 2022 and charged with ‘fraud’ alongside two other members of his church; they are still awaiting trial.

## Health concerns

‘In the Sanjiang Second People’s Hospital, around October at the end of 2023, I had an attack of cholecystitis,’ writes Elder Zhang. ‘My face was sallow. The doctor called me a little golden man, I stayed in the hospital for more than a month, received infusions for more than 20 days, and was diagnosed with liver cirrhosis.’

In May 2024, his lawyer visited him at the Guiyang City Detention Centre and reported that he appeared slightly thin, at this point unaware of Elder Zhang’s diagnosis with liver cirrhosis. In July, Zhang’s family learned that an appeal for his release on medical grounds had been rejected.

Even if he is released however, the fact remains that Elder Zhang and his wife have been subjected to over three years of injustice. China must not only release him immediately, without condition, but also the countless others who are detained in relation to the peaceful practice of their religion or belief.

The international community must increase pressure on the Chinese Communist Party to do this, and must not be misled by lies – including those put forward during the Universal Periodic Review at the United Nations.

And together, we must do all we can to ensure that stories like Elder Zhang’s are told as loudly and widely as possible.

Play your part  
**in tackling injustice**

**CSW** everyone  
free to believe



Madhuri in Nasik, India. Photo: Marcus Perkins/CSW (2008)

## 45 years of speaking out against injustice

We have seen many breakthroughs over the last 45 years, and we will continue to stand with people who are targeted for their beliefs – for as long as it takes.

Whether you have joined us in working for justice through prayer, giving or campaigning (or all three), thank you!

**Please continue to partner with us in this vital work  
as so many people still need your help.**

**Give £4 a month.**

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