

release

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FREEDOM!

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PERSECUTION AND JOY

Learning
from our
persecuted
sisters

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Prayer Power

release
international
voice of persecuted christians



We prayed for Indonesian pastor Rinaldy Damanik, who was sentenced to three years in jail in June 2003 for allegedly 'possessing illegal weapons.' He was granted early release in November 2004.

Prayer Power



In May 2002 Release launched the 7x7 prayer campaign and asked supporters to pray for seven years for seven countries where

Christians have faced intense persecution.

Here we give thanks to God for answered prayer, and highlight specific situations where persecuted Christians need your continuing intercession.

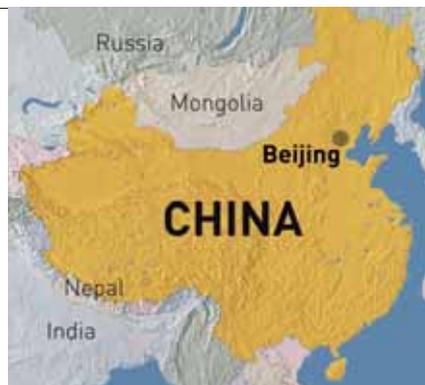
CHINA

Religious Freedom Rating: 6
(1 is best, 7 is worst)

Although the constitution provides for religious freedom, China's Government has consistently tried to control religious practice.

All religious groups are required to register. Those that refuse are regarded as 'illegal' and sometimes forced underground. State-sanctioned churches are closely monitored. 'Illegal' groups are even sometimes branded 'evil cults', which makes it easier to prosecute them. Members of unregistered churches risk imprisonment and sometimes torture.

release prayer



was arrested in the August for possession of 5,000 illegally-published Bibles, and who faced up to 15 years in jail on charges of 'illegal business practices'. We thank God that Zhou, in fact, was released six months later in February 2008. The court decided not to proceed with the charges because of insufficient evidence.

We also asked you to pray for nine house church leaders who were arrested in July 2007 and sent to labour camps in Hubei. Our partner China Aid helped to push for a legal review of the case – which resulted in the original conviction being overturned. The leaders were freed in January 2008, and, unusually, the director of the labour camp apologised for their wrongful detention.

In 2007 we also asked you to pray for house church activist Hua Huiqi who was freed in July 2007 after serving nearly six months for 'obstructing justice'. Sadly the authorities refused to release his elderly mother, Shuang Shuying, who was given a two-year sentence for 'wilfully damaging public and private property'.

KEEP ON PRAYING

- For churches and Christians who continue to face harassment and detention.

INDONESIA

Religious Freedom Rating: 5
(1 is best, 7 is worst)

There is officially no state religion in Indonesia - but Islam seems to be gaining strength politically, often at the expense of religious minorities such as Christians. The province of Aceh, for example, has imposed Sharia or Islamic law.

Christians say they are being marginalised in society - and increasingly persecuted. Many house churches have been closed.

Nationally, they are the target of a concerted campaign by militant Islamist groups bent on the total Islamisation of the archipelago. Groups such as Laskar Jihad have carried out jihad or holy war

against Christian communities, particularly in the Moluccas and Central Sulawesi. The Indonesian army has been accused of complicity and involvement in these attacks.

ANSWERS TO PRAYER

We thank God that the Malino Peace Accords, signed seven years ago, have helped maintain a fragile peace – although sporadic attacks on Christians continue.

The brutal murder of three Christian schoolgirls in October 2005 by militants in Poso prompted prayer around the world. Their parents later publicly forgave the culprits in court. Three men were convicted of their killings in March 2007.

As part of 7x7 we asked you to pray for the release of the three Sunday School teachers Dr Rebekka Zakaria, Eti Pangesti and Ratna Bangun, who were jailed for three years in Sept 2005 for 'Christianisation'. They were freed in June 2007. While inside prison Dr Zakaria gave medical care to prisoners – and the women were allowed to hold church meetings.

We asked you to pray for the release of Christian clothes trader Abraham Bentar Rohadi, who was jailed for blasphemy in 2006. He was released on parole in April 2008, a year early, after serving two years of a four-and-a-half-year sentence for blasphemy. Please continue to pray for Abraham as he resettles after his imprisonment.

KEEP ON PRAYING

- For the release of the 41 Christians jailed in July 2007 for five years for 'abusing the Koran'. They had taken part in a prayer retreat organised by Campus Crusade, during which they prayed for the Muslim world. Video footage of the retreat caused offence to local Muslims.

'I really felt the power of your prayers in prison and they strengthened my faith'

Christian prisoner of faith Rinaldy Damanik, Indonesia.



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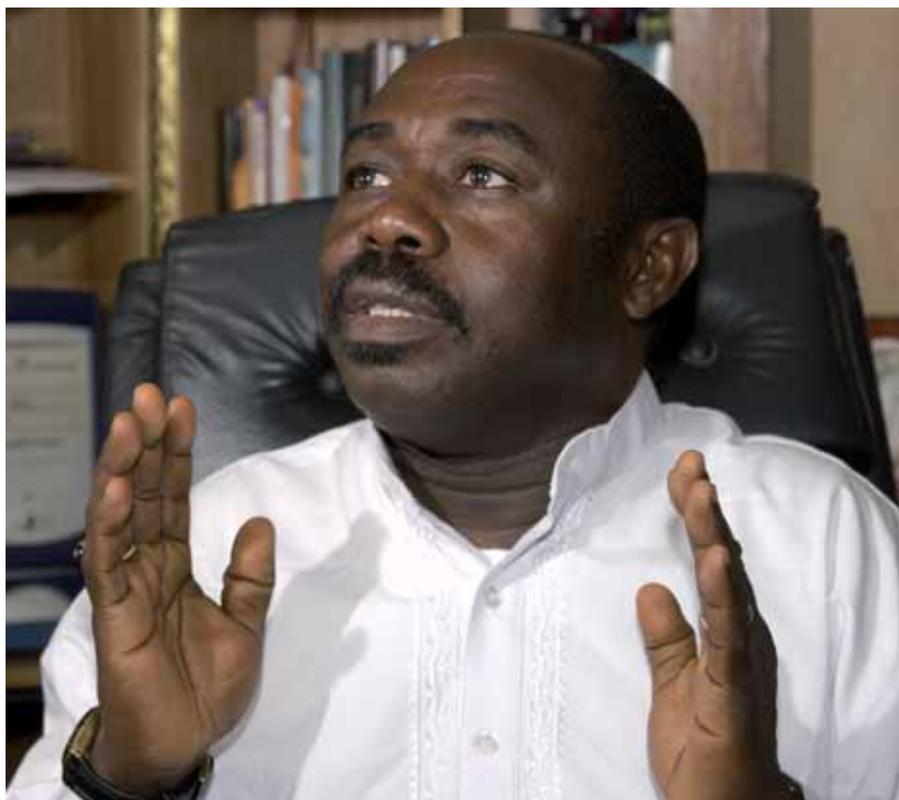
Chinese house church pastor Hua Huiqi (back left) was released from jail – but his elderly mother Shuang Shuying (front) remains in detention.

Under the Chinese system of 're-education through labour', thousands of dissidents are detained in prison camps, often without trial. Some are held for their religious views.

ANSWERS TO PRAYER

We thank God for the continuing growth of the church in China – especially among unregistered churches – and for the release from prison of a number of Christians imprisoned because of their active witness to Christ.

In September 2007 we asked you to pray for house church leader Zhou Heng, who



Thank God for protecting Benjamin Kwashi, the Anglican Bishop of Jos, Nigeria, who has been attacked and has faced death threats on several occasions.

attacked four times by armed militants in 2006; and Benjamin Kwashi, the Anglican Bishop of Jos, who was attacked by an armed gang in 2006 and 2007.

KEEP ON PRAYING

- Pray for Christians and church leaders to stand firm in the face of continuing civil disturbances – especially in Plateau and northern states.

‘We want the church internationally to continue to pray for our unity and help our leaders to be strong’

Mark Lipdo of Release partner Stefanos Foundation, Nigeria.

NORTH KOREA

Religious Freedom Rating: 7
(1 is best, 7 is worst)

North Korea is one of the most repressive regimes in the world. The extent of its brutality is unknown because it remains fiercely independent and politically isolated.

But the testimonies of defectors describe a society where human rights do not exist and freedom of association, worship, movement - even thought - are denied.

The precise number of Christians in North Korea is unknown. Before the Communists came to power, there were said to be 300,000 believers but, during the Korean War (1950-53), most fled to South Korea or were martyred.

Christians in North Korea are forced to hide their faith - or face terrible consequences. People have reportedly been executed just for owning a Bible.

ANSWERS TO PRAYER

Given the repressive nature of the North Korean regime, it is difficult to get information about what is happening in the country. However, we do thank God that during the course of our 7x7 campaign a number of Christians who were imprisoned because of their ministry to North Korean refugees in China have been released from jail.

Yoo Sang-joon, a former North Korean refugee and co-worker of Release’s partner Helping Hands Korea, was arrested by the Chinese authorities in August 2007 for helping refugees. We asked you to pray that Yoo would not be forcibly repatriated to North Korea, where he could have faced imprisonment, torture or even summary execution.

NIGERIA

Religious Freedom Rating: 5
(1 is best, 7 is worst)

Freedom of religion is enshrined in Nigeria’s constitution which declares it to be a secular state. Yet hardline Islamists seem bent on turning Nigeria into a Muslim nation.

When we launched 7x7 in 2002, twelve states in the north of Nigeria had adopted, or intended to adopt, Sharia or Islamic law. No other states have introduced Sharia since then.

In many instances, Sharia is applied to all citizens, not just Muslims. The result has been communal clashes for which religion is often the trigger - and in which thousands of people have died.

Christians are often marginalised and discriminated against in work and education. Churches have been burned and Christians sometimes killed in riots. There have been Muslim casualties too but the death toll among Christians is disproportionately high.

ANSWERS TO PRAYER

We thank God that since 2002 there has been no increase in the number of states



that have introduced Sharia. Nigerian Christians have been concerned that they will be victimised by Islamic courts.

In 2005 militants gave warning of imminent attacks against Christians in Plateau state, warning: ‘not one Christian will survive’. We thank God that this massacre did not happen.

Thank God for the continuing ministry of our partner Stefanos Foundation, which has given practical assistance to persecuted Christians in Plateau state, as well as in some of the northern states.

We thank God for answering our prayers by continuing to protect numerous church leaders. These include the Anglican Bishop Lamido in Kaduna state, who was

We thank God that in December 2007 Yoo was repatriated to South Korea, his adoptive home, where he also holds citizenship. Although unable to continue his ministry inside China, he said that he would continue to 'look for paths to quietly help' refugees fleeing from North Korea.

We also thank God for the release in November 2006 of Choi Yong-hun, who had served nearly four years in a Chinese jail for trying to help North Koreans defect. While in prison he was tortured by prison guards and fellow prisoners because of his Christian faith.

KEEP ON PRAYING

- For Release's partner Helping Hands Korea, and all Christians helping North Korean refugees in China.

Keep on praying for Release's partner Helping Hands Korea, and all Christians helping North Korean refugees in China.



Answered prayer: South Korean Christian worker Choi Yong-hun (right) is greeted by Release partner Tim Peters at Seoul airport after his release from prison in November 2006. Choi had been detained by the Chinese authorities for nearly four years for helping North Korean refugees.

PAKISTAN

Religious Freedom Rating: 6
(1 is best, 7 is worst)

The founder of Pakistan, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, promised equal rights for religious minorities. Yet Christians are among the poorest and most marginalised in Pakistani society.

In court, a Christian man's testimony is worth half that of a Muslim man's: a Christian woman's is worth only a quarter. So Christian women and young girls can be easy targets for abuse - and justice for them can prove elusive.

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion: proselytising among Muslims is banned. A form of Sharia called the Hudood Ordinance, introduced in 1979,

enforces Islamic penalties for crimes such as extra-marital sex. Islamic hard-liners lead a strong opposition and make reform difficult.

ANSWERS TO PRAYER

We thank God for the many answers to prayer we have seen since 2002 - especially the release from jail of prisoners unjustly accused because of their Christian faith.



Dr Robin Sardar

For example, in November 2008 Dr Robin Sardar walked free from Punjab's Gujranwala Central Jail after the man who had accused him of insulting Islam's prophet Mohammed changed his story. 'I am grateful to all people who prayed for me,' he said. 'I have not faced any torture in prison because I stayed in the jail silently, reading the Bible and praying to God.'

However, please continue to pray for Dr Sardar and his family. He cannot return home because of extremists' threats, and he and his family are now in hiding. A mob chanting death threats surrounded the Sardar family home at the time of his arrest.

In July 2007 we asked you to pray that a proposed apostasy Bill would not become law - and to date it has not. The proposed act, put forward by a group of Islamic hard-liners, would have imposed the death sentence on any Muslim man converting to another religion. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan described the proposal as 'disturbing'.

Christian headteacher Parvez Masih was freed from prison in April 2006, after serving five years for allegedly violating Pakistan's notorious 295(c) blasphemy laws. We thank God that he was cleared of all

Continued over





Pakistani Christian headteacher Parvez Masih, who was freed from prison in April 2006.

charges. Release had supported Parvez and his family since his arrest in April 2001.

In early 2004 we asked you to pray for Anwar Masih, who had been arrested in November 2003 and charged with blasphemy. With support from Release's partners CLAAS (Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement) he was released on bail in June 2004 – and then cleared in December. His was the first acquittal by a lower court judge.

KEEP ON PRAYING

- For protection of Release's partners CLAAS and Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan. Militants have tried to attack CLAAS staff on several occasions.

'Please pray for the protection and restoration of persecuted prisoners of faith and their families'

Sohail Johnson, Release partner, Pakistan

SUDAN

Religious Freedom Rating: 7
(1 is best, 7 is worst)

Africa's largest nation has only recently emerged from a devastating civil war which consumed Sudan for decades, and which cost the lives of 1.5 million people. Its infrastructure is in tatters: much of its population still struggles to survive.

Although the civil war centred around control of land and wealth, it also had a strong religious element.

The Khartoum Government declared jihad or holy war on southerners. Churches and Christian organisations were specifically targeted.

Even now, life for Sudan's Christians is tough, particularly in the north.

While attempts to extend Sharia across the whole of Sudan have failed, Islamic law

has frequently been applied to Christians in the north, particularly Khartoum.

Christians face discrimination in the workplace. Churches have been closed, destroyed - or even stopped from being built.

Some church leaders say that security forces in the south are rewarding people who convert to Islam - and forcing others to do so - to try to influence the outcome of the referendum planned for 2011.

ANSWERS TO PRAYER

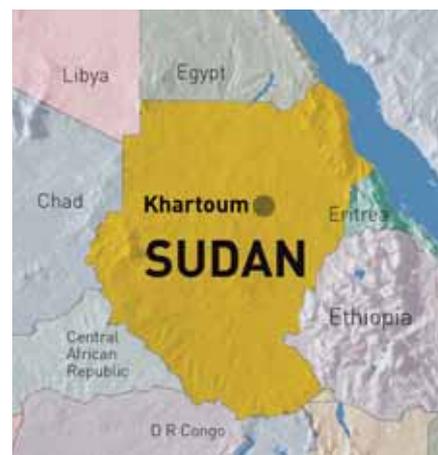
There is no doubt that the long-awaited Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in January 2005 was an historic breakthrough – ending two decades of north-south war. The agreement gave the south autonomy for six years, to be followed by a referendum for secession.

During the two years of negotiations between the Khartoum Government and SPLM (Sudanese People's Liberation Movement), there were several times when agreement seemed doubtful. We thank God that the deal has held, despite coming under pressure many times and the continuing instability in other parts of the country, such as Darfur.

In May 2008 we asked supporters of 7x7 to pray for an end to hostilities in the disputed and oil-rich border town of Abyei, where fierce fighting had broken out between former southern rebels and the northern army. We thank God that in June northern and southern politicians jointly took decisive action to stop the dispute escalating, and agreed to find an international arbiter to resolve boundary disputes around Abyei.

KEEP ON PRAYING

For the rebuilding of Sudan, and for Christians and churches in the north, where persecution is greatest.





We thank God for the end of Sudan's long-running civil war in 2005.



VIETNAM

Religious Freedom Rating: 6
(1 is best, 7 is worst)

Vietnam's constitution guarantees freedom of worship - but the reality for Vietnam's religious minorities contradicts this claim.

The Hanoi regime does recognise a few religious groups and denominations: the Roman Catholic Church, one Buddhist organisation and five Protestant organisations.

Churches from these umbrella groups have to register their congregations and are then subject to close surveillance and tight control.

These groups need specific permission for most activities outside their ordinary meetings, including: building or making alterations to places of worship, holding training sessions, doing charitable works, running religious schools.

All unregistered groups are banned and their members may face imprisonment, torture or death. Many house churches say they have been trying unsuccessfully for years to register and so remain outside the law. Christianity is seen as a Western religion and its adherents as potential subversives.

ANSWERS TO PRAYER

After an international campaign of prayer and letter-writing, Pastor Quang, former General Secretary of the Mennonite Church, and human rights activist, was released from prison in August 2005. Pastor Quang was one of the so-called 'Mennonite Six' sentenced in November 2004. We also rejoice that the Vietnam Mennonite church was finally officially recognised by the Government in November 2008.

We thank God that Hmong evangelist Sung Seo Pao was released in September 2005 after being imprisoned for 11 years for 'spreading religion'. Release was able to give him a small financial gift to support him and his family.

Prominent Hmong house church leader Ma Van Bay was unexpectedly released in September 2006 as part of a national prisoner amnesty. He was first arrested in 1997, and charged with 'illegally propagating Christianity'. He escaped, but was re-arrested in November 2003.



Hmong evangelist Sung Seo Pao was released from jail in 2005 after serving 11 years for 'spreading religion'. 'Every day I prayed that God would give me strength,' he said.

We thank God that despite continuing repression the church in Vietnam continues to grow – even in the north-west highlands where persecution has been most severe.

KEEP ON PRAYING

•For Christians currently imprisoned in Vietnam because of their active faith in Christ.

THANK YOU

Thank you so much for praying during the past seven years for Release, our partners and the persecuted Christians we serve. We hope that all these testimonies of answered prayer will encourage you to keep on praying. This makes such a difference, and is a key part of our ministry.

While the specific 7x7 seven-year prayer campaign finishes this year, we will continue to publish our regular prayer resources:



Prayer Shield, which comes with this magazine, gives a daily item for prayer.

Prayer Alert, sent by email every fortnight (also available by post for a suggested donation of £10 per year).



Prisoners of Faith Alert, sent by email every month.

World Update Webcast: Release's award-winning 10-minute video news bulletin, produced ten times a year, available from our website www.releaseinternational.org/webcast (also available on DVD for a suggested donation of £10 a year). See page 11 for more information.

Please also consider setting up a prayer group to pray for the needs of persecuted Christians regularly. To help you, we've produced a free prayer group guide, available on request.

SIGN UP

Sign up to receive our free email *Prayer Alert* by using the coupon on the back page of this magazine, or on our website www.releaseinternational.org/signup.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM RATING

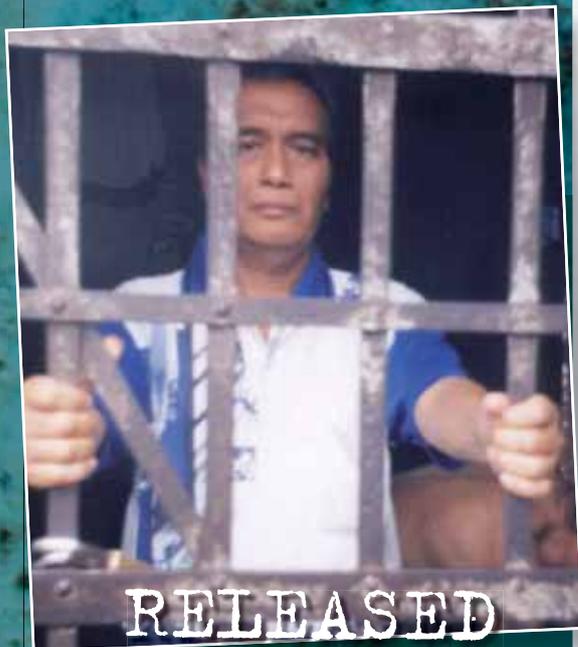
The Religious Freedom Ratings shown above are taken from Paul Marshall's authoritative study *Religious Freedom in the World* (2007, Rowman & Littlefield).

release

PRISONERS

'I am in chains for Christ'

Philippians 1:13



INDONESIA ABRAHAM BENTAR, who was imprisoned in March 2006 on charges of attempting to convert Muslims to Christianity, was released on parole on April 27, 2008, having served two thirds of his four and a half year sentence. Release helped to support his family while he was in prison.

'Every time I'm in prison the Lord is with me. He comforts me and gives me the courage and strength to survive.'

Chinese house church leader who spent 6 years in prison.

RELEASED

HAPPY NEW YEAR?

Hopefully your Christmas will have been a time of family celebration and reunion with friends and relatives. For many of us the beginning of another year offers renewed hope and the real possibility of realising some of our dreams and plans.

But for pastors and other Christians who've been jailed for their faith, 2009 may simply be a continuation of the imprisonment, the heavy manual labour, the solitude, the beatings and the verbal, mental and physical abuse received from those who persecute them because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

TEN FACTS about Christian prisoners of faith

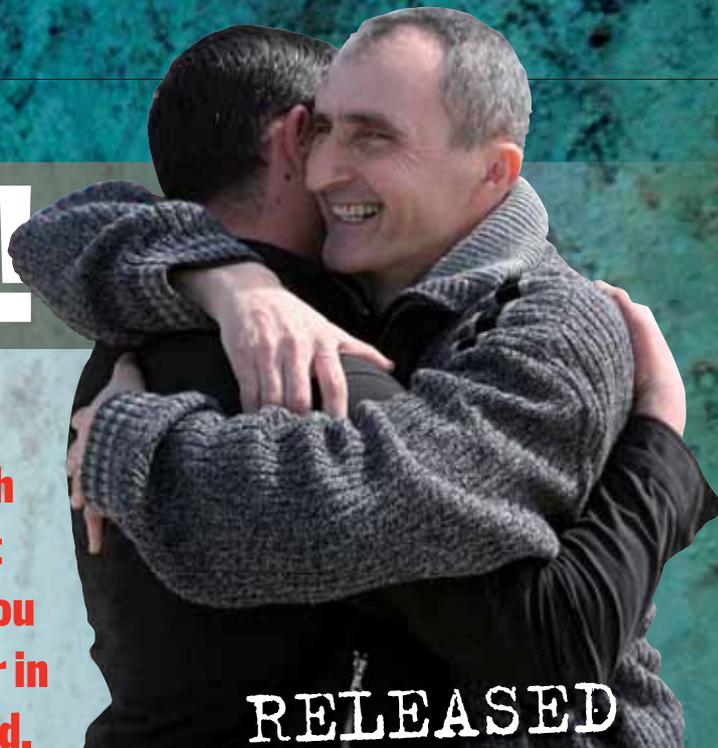
- 1 Most of the world is unaware of the torture that many Christians suffer.
- 2 In many countries Christians are thrown into prison without trial.
- 3 Sometimes Christian prisoners of faith are denied visits - even from their wives and children. Sometimes they are not even allowed to write letters.
- 4 Some prisoners exist on just 500 calories a day, the equivalent of two small bowls of soup and one roll.
- 5 While in prison some Christians are forced to carry out hard labour, often to meet impossible quotas.
- 6 When prisoners do not meet their quota, they may be beaten and sent back to finish the job, even if they have to start the next day's work without sleep.
- 7 Some imprisoned Christians have reported receiving only one glass of water each day.
- 8 Release actively works to support hundreds of imprisoned pastors and other Christians.
- 9 In some Islamic countries, many prisoners of faith and their families must remain in hiding after they have been freed, because of death threats from militants.
- 10 Some Christian prisoners even leave prison tearfully, as they say goodbye to new believers they have led to Christ while in prison.



CHINA PASTOR ZHANG. After several weeks of threats and attacks on the Zhang family by Public Security Bureau officials, Pastor Zhang 'Bike' Mingxuan, his wife, and his sister-in-law were released from detention on October 27. Pastor Zhang's sons, Jian and Chuang, who were beaten by officials on October 16, have been forced to leave Beijing. Please continue to pray for Pastor Zhang and his family. As *Release* went to press, we heard that he had been accused of engaging in 'illegal business operations' - for distributing free Pray for China wristbands - and that the Government has banned his Chinese House Church Alliance.

RELEASED!

Your prayers and your support are a lifeline for Christian prisoners of faith and their families. We thank God that some of the prisoners we've asked you to campaign on behalf of and pray for in the past year have now been released.



RELEASED

AZERBAIJAN ZAUR BALAEV, a Baptist pastor, was arrested in May 2007 and jailed for two years for what church members insist were false charges. He was released on March 19, 2008. 'It's a great joy to be free,' he said.



Photo: Compass Direct

RELEASED

LAOS PASTOR SOMPONG SUPATTO, aged 32, and two other believers were released on October 16 against the wishes of the village chief, who had threatened to hand Supatto a life sentence at a maximum-security prison. Authorities initially arrested Supatto and four other believers on July 20, storming their house church and ordering the 63 Christians present to cease worshipping or face arrest and imprisonment for 'believing and worshipping God'. Police initially said they would not release the men until they renounced their faith.



RELEASED

CHINA PASTOR LI MING was released from jail in summer 2008. He had been sentenced to two years of 're-education through labour' in July 2006. Following his release from prison Li Ming opened his Bible to share from 1 Peter 4:16: 'We are blessed for suffering for His name,' he said. Release gave a gift to help Pastor Li and his family.

'I am here with Jesus Christ and we suffer and rejoice together.'
Pastor Zaur Balaev, while serving a two-year jail sentence in Azerbaijan.



SUPPORT PRISONERS OF FAITH



SIGN UP to receive our free monthly Prisoners of Faith email alert, so you can pray and take action for individual Christian prisoners. Please use the coupon on the back of this magazine – or visit our website www.releaseinternational.org/prisoners.

GIVE to support prisoners and their families – so they know they've not been forgotten. Call our Supporter Relations Team on 01689 823491 or give securely online at www.releaseinternational.org/donate. Thank you!