



## Lands that God will not Forget: The Former Soviet Union Countries of Central Asia

The persecution of Christians in former Soviet Union countries in Central Asia is, of course, bad news. But, ironically, it is also good news because it is evidence that people there are embracing the Good News of Jesus Christ in growing numbers and faithfully following Him.

### Central Asian Countries

1. Azerbaijan – 10 million (96% Muslim, 3% Christian)
2. Kazakhstan – 18.5 million (70% Muslim, 26% Christian)
3. Kyrgyzstan – 6 million (86% Muslim, 14% Christian)
4. Tajikistan – 8.9 million (90% Muslim, 9% Christian)
5. Uzbekistan – 30 million (93% Muslim, 4% Christian)

Christian communities historically existed in this vast region, but they were destroyed by the invasion of Islam that began around the eighth century. In the twentieth century, religions there were brutally suppressed by the communist Soviet Union. When that broke up in 1991, not only did new countries spring into existence, but also fledgling churches of Muslim converts emerged, which now fight for their spiritual life, oppressed by secular dictatorships and also extremists Muslims.

### Persecution Gets Personal in Kyrgyzstan

Often in Central Asian countries the most painful persecution is inflicted on Christians who have converted from Islam. These Christians are often embroiled in a constant struggle with the local Muslim community and even family members who turn against them. In Kyrgyzstan, a land-locked nation of 6 million people of whom 86% are Muslim, persecutors are often protected or encouraged by corrupt police officers.

In May 2018, a Kyrgyz Christian woman, recently converted from Islam, was held captive in her home and beaten by her Muslim family for refusing to renounce her faith in Christ. A church was burned down in the same area. When police arrived to investigate the arson, they demanded to know why the members attended church instead of going to the mosque. They even suggested the believers might have set fire to their own building.

Recently, three Muslim men almost killed Eldos, a 25-year-old Christian convert from Islam, in an attack in the Issk-Kul region of Kyrgyzstan. The assailants attempted to

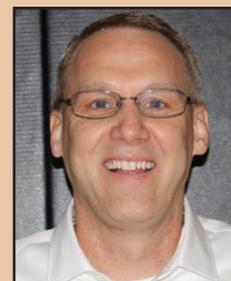


# Until All Have Heard

How then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? – Romans 10:14

Mark Brink

International Director  
Global Initiative:  
Reaching Muslim Peoples



Recently, a great national church leader passed away and thousands of people attended his funeral to give honor to this hero of the faith. In the funeral service, people spoke of his stellar leadership in the church he pastored and his personal commitment in this spiritually needy part of the world. He will be greatly missed, but we can rest assured

that the Kingdom of God does not rest on the shoulders of the workers but with the Lord of the harvest (Matthew 9:37). The harvest is the Lord's, but He gives us this biblical principle—before the Lord acts, He usually calls His people to prayer, and only after they have prayed does He accomplish that work. Ultimately, the work is the Lord's but He often limits himself to the prayers of His people.

In this edition of the *Intercede*, you will read about Central Eurasia—the land that God will not forget because of its valuable resource—its people—who are redeemable and precious in God's sight. They are people that God does not want to be lost for eternity. Is reaching them with the Good News of Jesus easy? No. Will it require the payment of the lives of missionaries and national workers? Yes. In *Matthew: A Commentary*, Frederick Dale Bruner refers to Matthew 9:37 and states, “The task looks hopeless, and Jesus admits as much with his contrasts of ‘huge’ and ‘hardly any’ but statistics are not ultimate. The living God is. Jesus refers us to this God, quite simply, in prayer.” What prayers is He asking us to pray?

First, God asks us to pray a prayer of surrender. This surrender means not asking others to do what we ourselves are unwilling to do. Surrender calls us to a deep level of participation with God in His work. It means giving. It means being involved in what makes Christ's heart break and weep. It may even mean going when He calls, but surrender always means the giving up of self. The second prayer is one of empowerment. We must lift up our eyes and seek the same quickening power that raised Christ from the dead. We do not make workers for the harvest; we pray, and God does the making. Holy Spirit baptism equips believers with the indispensable power for a Spirit-produced harvest. The third prayer is the prayer of faith. Through faith, we participate in what God is doing and then rest assured that the Lord of the Harvest will accomplish His work. Spiritual work must be done with the spiritual tool of faith.

As you read this issue of the *Intercede*, the Lord of the Harvest may call you! He is calling you to take part in some aspect of His Kingdom work. Hear the voice of His Spirit speaking to you now!



# Muslim World News



## **Pakistan: Five-Year Release**

Forty Pakistani Christians, on trial for the murder of two men during a violent protest following Easter suicide attacks on two churches in Youhanabad – a majority-Christian area in Lahore – have been freed by the Lahore Anti-Terrorism Court. Two others, arrested with them, have already died, allegedly due to a lack of access to medical treatment.

The suicide bombings (March 15, 2015) killed 17 and injured another 80, and were claimed by a splinter group of the Taliban, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar. The death toll would have been much higher if church volunteers on “security duty” had not acted quickly to defend worshippers.

In riots that erupted following the bomb blasts, a mob killed two Muslim men whom they believed had been involved in the attacks. In the end 42 Christians went on trial for their murder, but two died in prison before 2018. The other 40 have been waiting for their appeal to be heard by the Lahore High Court. The group have reached a financial settlement with the families of the two men, which under Pakistani law allows for their acquittal.—*World Watch Monitor*

## **Nigeria: Muslim Singer’s Blasphemy**

A mob of aggrieved Muslims in Kono State, Nigeria, attempted to tear down the house of and kill a singer who they believe insulted Muhammed, leading religious authorities to release a call for public calm over the matter on March 4.

The angry mob also staged a protest outside the office of the Sharia police, known as the Hizbah, who they felt were

not taking sufficient steps to punish the man for blasphemy. They also complained that similar incidents of people speaking freely in criticism of Islam regularly occurred across the state but were not fully investigated.

“Already the police are on top of the situation since the incident occurred,” Hizbah commander Harun Ibn Sina told *Vanguard* in an interview. “We have visited the residence where it took place.”

“The people were trying to demolish the house and kill the accused person involved in the blasphemy against Prophet Muhammad,” he continued. “The police were there but the person that sang the song had escaped.”

Sina also tried to issue a call for calm, explaining that the Sharia police were handling the situation and urged the public not to try and take the law into their own hands: “Those who came to show their concern felt like the government was doing nothing about it. I wish to call on the public to remain calm as the parents of the singer are with the police and they are on top of the situation.”

The singer, known as Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, is said to belong to the Tijjaniya sect of Sunni Islam, popular across western Africa, many of whose members believe its founder, Ibrahim Niass, was a more influential figure than Muhammed. Family members of the singer are also facing retribution for their relative’s supposed crimes. Many have already been subject to violent attacks after protesters, the majority of whom are young men, set fire to his family home. His family since been forced to go into hiding.—*Breitbart*

force him to say the *shahada* (the Islamic creed), the reciting of which is considered by Muslims to be conversion to Islam. Eldos was viciously beaten and left bleeding with a severe concussion, a fractured jaw, broken teeth, an eye injury, and a suspected brain hemorrhage. The police reportedly attempted to disguise the religious motivation for the attack by claiming Eldos was beaten for playing loud music.

## Small Churches Forced to Break the Law

Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan all require churches to register, but the rules of registration are impossible for small congregations to meet, thus rendering them unlawful. From 2011, a religious organization in Kazakhstan is required to have 50 members who live locally, while in Kyrgyzstan, a 2009 law demanded 250 signatures from members in order for registration to be granted, and in Turkmenistan, as of April 2016, 50 founding members were required. Turkmenistan traces its Christian roots back to the third century, but now it is an isolated and closed nation, dominated by Islam and a presidential personality cult.

In Kazakhstan, churches that are unable to register are subjected to police raids on their meetings and members' homes; fines, detention, and imprisonment; seizure of church equipment and Christian literature; and the closure of church buildings. But in April 2018 even registered churches in the west of the country were asked to submit the full names, ages, places of study and state-assigned identification numbers of all people under 18 who attended church meetings. A government official admitted that the demand for personal data "was not sent to Muslims ... just to Christians."

In a town in a Muslim-dominated area of southwestern Kyrgyzstan, a network of small fellowships of Muslim-background Christians is forced to operate in semi-secrecy due to strong opposition from local mosques, social ostracism from the Muslim community, and even threats of violence. The "network pastor" and his wife visit the homes of Christian families who converted from Islam, encouraging them to stand firm in their faith. The pastor also holds regular gatherings in his own house, and there is a children and young people's ministry. "We have good contacts with local people and visit them at home and share the Gospel and read the Bible. Some of them have started to visit our Sunday Christian gatherings," the pastor said.

## Christian Businesses Protect Against Poverty

Christian converts from Islam are often persecuted by being denied work. In Kyrgyzstan, many Christian men, who



cannot accept these conditions, are forced to leave their communities to search for work, leaving their wives and children behind and their small churches weakened by their absence.

In one remote Kyrgyz community, a Christian compassion ministry provided the money for five struggling Christian families from Muslim backgrounds to buy cattle. The families were blessed by the help of a non-believer who knew the cow market. He secured the best cows for the lowest prices, enabling the families to buy 18 animals.

"When we brought one of the brothers five cattle, his children couldn't sleep because they were looking at the cows all night! All the family was very happy," said one of the Christians.

The cows produce milk, of course, but, more importantly, they produce manure that is processed using earthworms to make bio-humus compost, which is sold in the spring. "No one in our region works in the production of bio-humus and it is an extremely valuable product," said one of the Christian men.

# will not Forget

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## Strengthening Pastors Through Training

A crucial aspect of ministry in Central Asia is enabling local church leaders to get the ministry training and Bible teaching they have not had the opportunity to gain. This is especially helpful to those caring for new believers facing persecution. Sometimes it is necessary to convene training sessions in remote areas, as the authorities are less likely to interfere in such places. Leaders are also trained in a variety of skills: how to resolve conflicts in the church, how to help people with family problems, and how to improve security to avoid being persecuted.

An extra benefit of these training gatherings is that isolated and hard pressed church leaders and workers can encourage one another. “Kazakhstan is a very big country and most of our church leaders don’t have any communication with each other or with senior leaders of our association. Some of these pastors are on the verge of emotional breakdown. These sessions help them to recover emotionally and spiritually,” says one of the organizers.

Muslim-background believers also take advantage of organized training sessions. They usually choose to meet in smaller groups rather than large ones, so as not to draw attention from the Muslim majority.

## Hope for Uzbekistan with New President

For many years, Uzbekistan was the harshest Central Asian country in its treatment of Christians, but President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who came to power in 2016, is more tolerant of religious activity than his predecessor. In 2017, there were official celebrations in Uzbekistan to mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and, for the first time in almost two decades, local congregations and church buildings have been able to get registration, so that they can function legally.

The first Uzbek Bible became available in 2017 and in that year 3,000 copies were sold legally by the Bible Society of Uzbekistan. “It is important for us because these copies are permitted officially for use and cannot be confiscated,” said a local church leader.

Around 93% of the population of Uzbekistan are Muslim. In the fourteenth century, Tamarlane, who is celebrated as a hero among the Uzbek people, almost entirely eradicated Christianity. And, despite the somewhat more tolerant attitude of the central government, Christians—especially con-

The cows mean these brothers in Christ can remain with their families and continue to play important roles in their local Christian fellowships.

## Building the Church, Brick by Brick

Because of their poverty, Central Asian congregations often struggle with the costs of their meeting places. Buying property and constructing or renovating buildings requires great sacrifice. Church members readily contribute their labor and meager funds to help with construction or equipment. Last year in Tajikistan, a very poor nation which is estimated to be 90% Muslim and just 1.5% Christian, a local church installed a new heating system so that very young and elderly worshippers could attend worship during the freezing winter months. In another Central Asian country, radiators and new windows were installed to keep out the cold in a building shared by several congregations. And in Kazakhstan, even with government restrictions, a new church building has been constructed—now shared by four congregations. A permanent building is very important for Christians in Kazakhstan, and enables a church to begin the process of registration so they can meet legally.

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verts from Islam—still face persecution from other sources such as Muslim relatives, local government officials, and Islamist extremists.

Gathering to pray in a private home remains illegal and those who are caught usually find themselves in court the next day and have to pay a fine. Ironically and thankfully, the fines have become much smaller since Mirziyoyev came to power.

## **Illegal to Give the Gift of God's Word**

A Christian man was fined two weeks' average wages in January 2019 for giving a woman a Uzbek-language copy of the New Testament as a gift. A court ordered that the book be destroyed. Using a New Testament for "missionary purposes" is a crime, according to the government's Committee for Religious Affairs.

At the police station, the man was informed that his case was being dealt with by the local "Struggle with Extremism and Terrorism Department" and he was charged with breaking two separate laws. These were Administrative Code Article 184-2, which refers to the illegal production, storage, or import of religious material for distribution, and Article 240-2 banning proselytization.

Southeastern Uzbekistan borders Tajikistan. As in Uzbekistan, the Tajik authorities make efforts to prevent Muslims getting Christian literature. In January 2019, 5,000 calendars sent to Christians in registered evangelical churches in Tajikistan were burned by the authorities. The calendars contained Bible verses and the authorities told a church lead-

er that the number of calendars was much higher than the number of Christians believed to be in the country.

Import and distribution of religious literature must be approved by the Tajikistan authorities. Similar confiscations have led to Christians being imprisoned—such as Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov, a father-of-three in his early 40s, who was jailed in 2017 for three years after police confiscated "subversive" hymn books from his church.

## **A Great Testimony from Azerbaijan**

A cow played an unlikely role in the life of Rena, who turned from being a persecutor to being a follower of Christ in a town in Azerbaijan, a nation which is 96% Muslim. Rena was furious that her sister and mother had left Islam to follow Jesus as Christians. She scorned them and screamed at them, "Will you shame us among our people, maybe you will even put a cross on your house?" Her mother simply held out the New Testament and said, "If you knew about this book, you'd want to read it."

One day Rena lost her cow and spent three days searching in vain for the animal. On the third day, she thought, "They say Jesus Christ is alive. If this is true, let my cow return to me, and I will believe in Him." Rena continued, "When it got dark, we went along the road and in lights from cars I saw something running toward us. It was my cow! Then I said, 'Lord, I believe that You are the truth.' And when I came back to my courtyard with the cow I said, 'My cow has been found and Jesus Christ made it happen!'" She added, "From that day I am a Christian and I am following Jesus."

The church in Rena's village has now planted two new churches in neighboring villages in Azerbaijan and last year celebrated the first anniversary of their official registration as a church. Their application had previously been rejected six times!

## **Looking to the Future**

Christians in the former Soviet Union countries are embroiled in a constant struggle to follow their faith. In many areas, they are denied the basic freedom to meet together to worship freely. However, since the fall of the Soviet regime, thousands of Muslims have turned to Christ, hundreds of new churches have been planted in many people-groups, and there is a great hope for more good news in the future.

*\*This article is abridged and used by permission from Barnabas International. Names and places have been changed to protect against persecution.*



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**Friday, May 1, 2020. Please pray for**

...*the country of Iran*. Protestors have recently expressed a broad range of grievances. Various sources estimate hundreds have been killed as a result of the government's crackdown. Of Iran's population of 83 million, 97.8% are Muslim.  
...*wisdom for expatriate workers* who have been denied re-entry into a North African country.  
...*approximately 25 million foreigners* who are working in the predominately Muslim Arab Gulf States. Among the foreigners are thousands of followers of Jesus who are strategically placed to share the gospel.

**Friday, May 8, 2020. Please pray for**

...*Fatemeh Bakhteri in Iran*. In 2018, she was "convicted for her Christian activities." In May 2019, she was pressured by judges to renounce her faith. She refused and was imprisoned, where she remains.  
...*deliverance and exposure to gospel witness* for Muslim Uyghurs in China; 1 million are in "re-education camps."  
...*the city of Boga in the Democratic Republic of Congo*. A Muslim militant group recently attacked the city and abducted 200 people, including women and children.

**Friday, May 15, 2020. Please pray for**

...*Brahim, in a Middle Eastern country*, who converted to Christ at a home-screening of *The Jesus Film*.  
...*a powerful anointing on Yezidi Shingali dialect Bible stories* that have been uploaded to YouTube. Pray that the stories will speak to the hearts of Yezidis in Iraq and Syria, many of whom speak the Shingali dialect.  
...*Ugandan Richard Wamala and his family*, recent converts from Islam. Muslim villagers have labeled him an infidel.

**Friday, May 22, 2020. Please pray for**

...*spiritual awakening for Muslims* who have fasted during Ramadan, which began April 23 and ends tomorrow, May 23.  
...*Rustam, a Tajik who converted from Islam to follow Jesus*. He is now the face of the SAT-7 TV program "Foundations of the Christian Faith" in Tajik. Of Tajikistan's population of 9 million, 99.7% are Muslim.  
...*Burkina Faso*, where Muslim terrorists continue to attack churches and schools.

**Friday, May 29, 2020. Please pray for**

...*the 46,000 speakers of the Ndut language* in west Senegal. Pray for those who will be typesetting the Ndut New Testament over the coming weeks. 43% of the Ndut people are Muslim.  
...*the Arise Conferences in Central Asia* that minister to women from a Muslim background.  
...*the country of Mauritania*. Of Mauritania's population of 4.5 million, 99.5% are Muslim.

*I urge, then, first of all that requests, prayers, intercession and  
thanksgiving be made for everyone. – 1 Timothy 2:1, NIV*



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## **Friday, June 5, 2020. Please pray for**

...*wisdom and protection for former Muslims Shino and Shania Gabo.* Together they now host TV programs in the Somali language, answering questions and discipling believers. Of Somalia's population of 15 million, 99.6% are Muslim.

...*Zaina, an Iraqi Kurdish lady* who emigrated with her family to Europe. After attending Bible studies for months, Zaina, along with her husband and daughters, have left Islam and accepted Jesus, and now all have been baptized.

...*the Christian majority region of West Papua New Guinea.* The Front Jihad Islam group has declared a "jihad war" on this region. Since August, dozens have been killed in this region and thousands have been forced to flee.

## **Friday, June 12, 2020. Please pray for**

...*Antonios, 92, former Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church* and a strong voice for Christians, who has been deposed by Eritrean authorities. In poor health, he is under house arrest. Of Eritrea's 3.4 million people, 45% are Muslim.

...*an end to the relentless conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan.* Offer praise to the Lord for the continuing fruit among Sudanese refugees in neighboring countries. Of Sudan's population of 43 million, 90% are Muslim.

...*the wife and children of a Christian convert from Islam* in Egypt, Hussein Muhammad. When he posted about his faith on social media, members of his extended family killed him.

## **Friday, June 19, 2020. Please pray for**

...*the 0.2% Christian minority in Muslim-majority Turkey,* where sharing the Good News can come at great cost. Remember pastors like "Erkan" who recently was threatened for witnessing to three Muslim school teachers.

...*the defeat of Boko Haram Muslim terrorists* who continue their deadly attacks in an effort to force Christians to flee from Nigeria. Of Nigeria's population of 200 million, almost 50% are Muslim.

...*victory in Jesus' name* over the "spirit of external control and censorship" wielded by Islamic governments.

## **Friday, June 26, 2020. Please pray for**

...*a church in Tizirt, Algeria,* that has been forcibly shut down by Muslim authorities. This church building had been used for services and also as a Bible school since 2013. Of Algeria's population of 43 million, 96% are Muslim.

...*a former sheik,* now a pastor in Uganda. Umar has survived two attacks, one in which acid was poured on his face.

...*the many born again Christians* among "foreign workers" in the country of Qatar – that they will be salt and light.

*\*All personal names used herein are pseudonyms.*

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P.O. Box 2730, Springfield, MO 65801-2730  
1-866-816-0824 (toll free)  
[www.reachingmuslimpeoples.com](http://www.reachingmuslimpeoples.com)  
[www.jumaaprayer.org](http://www.jumaaprayer.org)