

Network for Inter faith Concerns

Christian-Muslim News Digest Issue 3 2012

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Introduction

Welcome to the third issue of the Digest for 2012. This issue reports on the unexpected release of a Christian Pastor in Iran; the release on bail of Rimsha Masih in Pakistan, whilst on blasphemy charges; condemnation by Muslim leaders of attacks on churches in Mombasa, Kenya; joint initiatives between Muslims and Christians in Indonesia, and something of the plight of Christians in Syria.

The violent repercussions in response to the appearance on YouTube of a clip from the *Innocence of Muslims* video and the most recent batch of offensive cartoons have been largely anti-Western, rather than specifically anti-Christian, so I have not attempted to deal with how the media has covered these stories in this Digest.

Iran: Pastor freed

The unexpected release from jail of Youcef Nadarkhani in Rasht, Gilan province, Iran in early September was widely reported in the media. Saeed Kamali Dehghan, writing in the [Guardian](#), explained the background to the case:

Nadarkhani [now aged 35] was arrested in October 2009 for converting at the age of 19 to Christianity from Islam, his parents' religion. Although he insisted he was never a practising Muslim, Iran considers the religion of a child to be that of his father. Those who convert to other religions risk arrest or even execution for apostasy. In 2010, Nadarkhani was sentenced to death after being found guilty of apostasy, a conviction upheld by a supreme court in 2011.

The report also explained the circumstances of his release, that it was understood that Mohammad Ali Dadkhah, the lawyer acting for Nadarkhani, had argued that Iran is a signatory to international treaties that require it to respect freedom of religion.

Nadarkhani was acquitted of apostasy but instead charged with acting against national security and therefore sentenced to three years in jail. ... But because he had already served three years in prison, he was allowed to go home.

It was also reported that previously Nadarkhani had been told that he would be released if he renounced Christianity and that Amnesty International had described him as "a prisoner of conscience" who was "being held solely on the basis of his religious beliefs".

The article reports that other Christians are still being held in jail in Iran. "In April, another pastor, Farshid Fathi, 33, became the latest victim of state persecution of Christian converts after being sentenced to six years in prison by a revolutionary court."

In the [Daily Mail](#) Snejana Farberov reports on the involvement of the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), a Washington-based watchdog group, in campaigning for the pastor's release. It quotes Jordan Sekulow, executive director of ACLJ, who stated that Nadarkhani's "charges were lowered to evangelizing to Muslims, which carried a three-year sentence. [That] he was released from custody with time served". The report also states that according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Nadarkhani was arrested for questioning the Muslim monopoly of religious instruction for children and for wanting to register a home-based church.

A report posted on the [Iran Human Rights](#) web-site explains that:

Nadarkhani led a congregation of about 400 Christians in Rasht. The congregation is part of a nationwide evangelical group called the Church of Iran, many of whose members have been arrested and prosecuted since 2009.

It also states that Nadarkhani was “only sentenced to three years in prison on the charge of ‘propaganda against the regime,’ and as he had already spent this time in prison, he was therefore released after his court session”.

Ed Thornton, writing in the [Church Times](#), reports on the amount of publicity that surrounded the case. The report quotes Dr Khataza Gondwe, Christian Solidarity Worldwide’s team leader for Africa and the Middle East, as saying:

The huge amount of publicity that the case had generated around the world could have been a factor in the court's deciding to release Mr Nadarkhani. Countries with which Iran is on friendly terms - particularly in Latin America and Africa - had commented on the case. Last week, the Uruguayan Senate adopted a resolution calling for the suspension of Mr Nadarkhani's death sentence.

The report added that “Dr Gondwe said that Christians should pray for Mr Nadarkhani's safety. Another Iranian Christian pastor, Mehdi Dibaj, who was sentenced to death for apostasy in 1993, was assassinated six months after his release in January 1994.”

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Pakistan: Blasphemy case girl released on bail

The case of Rimsha Masih has been widely reported in the media. She is from Mehrabadi, a deprived area of Islamabad, and was accused by a local Imam of burning pages of the Qur’an. She was arrested on 16th August 2012 and charged with blasphemy under section 295b of the Pakistan Penal Code.

The case raised both local and international media interest because of her reported age and mental ability. Following her arrest she was medically examined and media reports give her age as being either 11 or 14 years old; several reports state that she has Down’s Syndrome. Her age means that in the Pakistan legal system she is seen as a minor. It was this that eventually allowed her to be released on bail, which is not normally permitted under the penal code for blasphemy cases.

The case against her became even more contentious after a Muslim cleric, Hafiz Mohammed Khalid Chishti, was arrested on suspicion of evidence-tampering, accused of planting incriminating evidence against Rimsha Masih. Paul Wilkinson, writing in the [Church Times](#), reported that Allama Tahir Ashrafi, the chairman of the country's leading body of Muslim clerics, All Pakistan Ulema Council, had spoken at a press conference, stating that Rimsha was:

“a daughter of the nation”, and demanded that all the organs of the Pakistani state come together to investigate the circumstances surrounding her arrest for allegedly burning pages of the Qur’an.

He attacked Hafiz Mohammed Khalid Chishti, ... who was accused ... of tampering with evidence in order to ensure the girl’s conviction. “Our heads are bowed with shame for what Chishti did”.

Mr Ashrafi that Mr Chishti was merely the front man for other individuals “behind the scene” who wanted to stoke antagonism against the Christian minority in the area to force them to flee. “I have known for the past three months that some people in this area wanted the Christian community to leave so they could build a *madrasah* there.”

That this support for Rimsha came from leading Muslim clerics within Pakistan was acknowledged by Dr. Paul Bhatti, Minister in charge for National Harmony. The [Pakistan Observer](#) reported his comments at a press conference after Rimsha's release on bail. He commented that "The religious scholars, investigation teams, media and Judiciary deserve appreciation for their positive role" adding that "lawyers and religious scholars [views] were taken on board for legal opinion on the case and the guidance of religious scholars was sought to get [an] Islamic point of view as the accused was a minor and also suffering from Down's Syndrome".

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Kenya: Imams condemn attacks on Churches in Mombasa

Rioting broke out in Mombasa following the killing of Sheikh About Rogo Mohammed in Mombasa on 27th August 2012. The death has been described variously as being a "drive-by shooting", "targeted assassination" or an "extra-judicial killing". Rogo was viewed as a controversial Imam who was seen as inciting youth to take up arms against Kenyan forces in Somalia, where they are actively involved in supporting the government in its struggle against al-Shabab, an insurgency group which is active in Somalia.

The rioting led to the deaths of several people including police and prison warders and the destruction of a number of churches in Mombasa. The violence and destruction was condemned by Muslim and Christian leaders.

Questions have been raised about the death of Rogo and the ensuing level of violence, apparently targeting churches. The government appointed a panel to review the events and several people have been charged with orchestrating the riots and the attacks on churches.

Philip Muyanga and Anthony Kitimo, writing in the *Daily Nation*, report that arrest warrants were issued for two men accused of inciting violence after the death of the Muslim preacher. Two inflammatory phrases were allegedly uttered by the men on 27th August at Masjid Musa in Majengo area, Mombasa:

"Imam wote wanaoungana na serikali wachinjwe na pia polisi yeyote akionekana auwawe" — (all Muslim preachers who are taking sides with the government should be slaughtered, and any police officer seen should be killed).

"Makanisa yote Mombasa yachomwe" — (All churches in Mombasa should be burned).

The *Friday Bulletin*, published by Jamia Mosque in Nairobi, in its leading article following the killing of Rogo, reported that the Chairman of the National Muslim Leaders Forum (NAMLEF), Abdullahi Abdi, had condemned the destruction and the burning of churches in Mombasa and emphasized that Christians should not be taken as enemies of Muslims.

It is prudent to know that it is illogical to punish people for crimes they never committed. These were gangs that were taking advantage of the situation and they must be dealt [with] according to the law.

Abdi stressed that Islam upholds and respects places of worship and that there was no justification to burn and destroy properties. He called on Muslims and non-Muslims to live in harmony and to desist from lawlessness that can only disenfranchise and abuse the innocent.

Peter Karanja, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches of Kenya, issued a [statement](#) condemning the attack on churches:

We have completely failed to understand the logic that made the demonstrators associate the heinous murder of Aboud Rogo with the churches and other properties belonging to innocent Kenyans. The clear message is that these attacks are indicative of a deep seated hatred towards the churches whose cause is inexplicable.

The response of religious leaders against violence is important as Kenya prepares for elections in early 2013, especially in light of the post-election violence that followed the contested results in 2007.

[Gabriel Gatehouse](#) reported on the situation in Mombasa a month after the violence, particularly on its effect on the tourist industry. He interviewed local people, including:

Hussein Khalid, a lawyer at the non-governmental organisation Muslims For Human Rights (Muhuri), based in Mombasa. [Who said] "We have seen it happening. We have seen youth leaving their families, leaving their communities and joining militias on their way to Somalia."

Mr Khalid says tensions between the Muslim community and the security services are one reason for the rise in jihadist sentiment.

Khalid believes there is a deeper underlying cause for the unrest, citing the lack of employment for the youth and the poor infrastructure on the coast.

Gatehouse also interviewed Beatrice Mburire a church member at a Presbyterian Church of East Africa in Kisauni, to the North of Mombasa, which had been looted during the riots:

"Actually, they were looking for the pastor, they wanted revenge on another preacher - a Christian preacher," [she said] referring to the earlier killing of the Muslim cleric.

There is a real concern in Mombasa that these events will exacerbate tensions amongst different communities in the region and that religious differences could be used to foment further violence.

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Indonesia: Women in inter-religious dialogue

In recent years there have been tensions between different faith groups in Indonesia which have led to disagreements and violence. In July, [the World Council of Churches](#) included a report on inter-faith work being carried out by the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (CCI) and [Indonesian Conference of Religion and Peace](#) (ICRP).

The report was based on interviews with Rev. Krise Anki Gosal, co-ordinator for the women and youth department at CCI and Musdah Mulia, president of the ICRP, a Muslim non-governmental organization based in Jakarta, dedicated to promote interfaith dialogue, democracy and the values of pluralism and peace.

Mulia is reported as saying that:

Almost 20 percent of the population in our country is non-Muslim. We are a plural society and for the sake of cohesion interfaith cooperation is necessary. It is very important to engage in dialogue with churches in Indonesia, as after Islam, Christianity is the second major religion in our country. Therefore, we have conducted several programmes with Christian organizations.

She sees that working with the CCI on inter-religious dialogue is a constructive way of discovering issues of common concern.

In our discussions with the churches we have realized that we face the same issues, such as poverty, illiteracy, corruption and economic disparities in our country. Therefore, interfaith dialogue is more important than ever before, and is necessary to counter the radical perspectives that often have roots in political agendas.

Mulia sees that interfaith dialogue is important in the everyday lives of the people, where it can be translated into action. She regards radical influences as a threat to the Indonesian society, which has been known for valuing interfaith harmony.

We realize that radicalism is a threat to all of us, including religious minorities. Whenever there is an attack on the value of plurality, we feel sad and want to work together to challenge radical elements. We have to work hand in hand with the churches to create a sustainable society. This is why we have conducted several programmes together, such as youth workshops, where we promote dialogue through educational activities.

Gosal shares these views with Mulia, and has coordinated several youth initiatives with support from the ICRP. Gosal spoke about projects that were conducted to promote “values of plurality” among youth.

We have organized a couple of workshops and seminars for youth, where we did awareness raising about themes like religious plurality, inter-religious harmony and cultural sensitivity. We have addressed these issues through educational activities.

Gosal considers these projects to be of great potential for a positive impact on the communities. Speaking on her experience of coordinating these initiatives, she said these workshops were able to bring together youth from diverse Christian and Muslim backgrounds.

These young people of different faiths formed a community, participated in the workshops and learnt about inter-religious tolerance and acceptance. This is how they overcome prejudice and negative thinking about ‘the other’.

The report concludes that the organizations had learnt from these inter-religious collaborations and they want to continue working together. One initiative is to introduce the concept of “values of plurality” and “respect for other religions” into the educational resources at Sunday schools in churches.

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Syria: Christians support stability, not Assad’s regime

Alarabiya reported an [interview](#) with Beshara al-Rai, Patriarch of the Lebanese Maronite community, in which he stated that “Syria’s Christians do not support the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, but they do want stability in their war-torn country”. In the interview he explained further:

In Iraq, when Saddam Hussein was removed, we lost a million Christians. Why? Not because the regime fell, but because there was no more authority, there was a vacuum. In Syria, it’s the same

thing, Christians do not back the regime but they are afraid of what may come next, that is their feeling.

The article then went on to show Christians' place in the current situation.

The Islamist tide that arose in the so-called Arab Spring countries has frightened many Christians, who are a minority in every Middle Eastern country and who are concerned for their survival should the multi-religious nature of the region change. Christians in Syria constitute one of the Middle East's oldest communities, though they number just five percent of a population of 22 million. Ever since the rise to power of the ruling Baath party, led by the Alawite majority, they have also enjoyed religious freedom.

At the end of July the World Council of Churches posted [an appeal](#) from Ignatius IV, Primate of the Antiochian Orthodox Church, in which he called for the international community and Muslims and Christians to work together for peace and stability in Syria:

A countless number of Christians and Muslims are victims of the violence; the hospitals are full with injuries and the pain is endless. Syrians, in spite of their religious backgrounds, have the right to live in their country with pride and dignity. During the past fifteen months, we have lost many people and a large number of Syrians were forced to evacuate from their homes. Christians had to flee their towns, cities and everything they own, and our beloved priests had to leave their churches.

We call all Syrians, in the name of God, to accept each other and live as one nation in our beloved Syria, the cradle of prophets and religions. We urge the United Nations and all Arab organizations to understand and respect our beloved country and to work together in order to achieve peace and stability in Syria.

On 4th September the World Council of Churches issued a statement calling for dialogue and prayer in support of peace in Syria:

[Statement on crisis in Syria](#)

1. Ever since the people in Syria started their claim for reforms in the country in March 2011, the World Council of Churches has been closely following the developments in the country. The WCC affirms the principle that governments and civil society have a duty to protect the lives and dignity of all citizens. This basic obligation is clearly stipulated under international human rights law according to the Geneva Conventions, which stipulates that even during conflicts, indiscriminate attacks on civilians by any party are not acceptable, and that combatants and non-combatants must be strictly distinguished. The crisis in Syria and the ongoing violence violates or negates these basic principles and obligations related to human rights and human dignity.
2. A message from the WCC executive committee addressed to the heads of churches in Syria, in February, 2012, affirmed the message by three heads of churches in Syria His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV, His Holiness Patriarch Zakka I, and His Beatitude Patriarch Gregorios III (issued on 15 December 2011) – in which they refused “the use of any type of violence” and called for the “respect of the principles of justice, freedom, human dignity, social justice and citizenship rights”.
3. Christians in Syria, as well as in the whole Middle East region, are indigenous, very much rooted to their traditions, and their continuous presence and witness have borne both challenge and responsibility throughout the country's history. While underscoring this reality the executive committee of WCC expressed confidence that “the churches in Syria, which are deeply rooted in the land, and have developed a long historic experience of engagement in the life of the society will have an important role in national dialogue especially in this critical and difficult moment”.
4. In a minute on “The Presence and Witness of Christians in the Middle East”, the Central Committee of WCC, in its meeting in February 2011, expressed the Council's principles that guide its policy concerning the Middle East region: “God's justice and love for all of creation, the fundamental rights of all people, respect for human dignity, solidarity with the needy, and dialogue with people of other faiths”. The minute also noted that “political developments in the region point to signs of hope for democratic changes, respect for human rights and the rule of

law in several countries". In this context we reaffirm the principle expressed by the Central Committee in 2011 that "peace and reconciliation must be conditioned by justice".

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