



# *Action by Christians Against Torture*

## *Harrow Group Newsletter no. 65 April 2021*

### **Walk with us**

Jesus, you know what it's like  
to feel abandoned  
lost and afraid.

Walk with us

And show us how to walk with others,  
who live in fear,  
who face death  
through hunger or war.

Show us how to pray  
for those we do not know  
and will not meet,  
but who are always loved by you.

Walk with us Jesus, Amen.

*Linda Jones/CAFOD*

### **Iran**

7 March 2021 was the day on which Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe came to the end of a five year prison sentence and she must have been hoping to fly home to her family in UK. Instead she has had to face another trial on new charges which included participating in a demonstration against the Iranian regime 12 years ago and we gather that she is now waiting for the result of that trial.

She is one of many foreign citizens or citizens with dual nationality who have been detained in Iran and in her case it appears that her imprisonment was linked to a financial debt owed by the UK to Iran for decades. She is by no means the first hostage to have been arrested in Iran to be ransomed for political reasons and in 2016 the UN Group on Arbitrary Detentions agreed that Nazanin's detention had been arbitrary.

Some of the conditions which Iranian prisoners can face were graphically depicted by Kylie Moore-Gilbert, an Australian university lecturer who was arrested in Iran after attending a conference there in 2018. She was convicted of spying, a charge which she denied, and sentenced to ten years. She was finally freed in 2020 in exchange for the release of three Iranians who had been held in Thailand. She has described being confined in prison in a two metre by two metre box as a form of psychological torture. "It's an extreme solitary confinement room designed to break you", she said.

We can only hope that the current attempt to renew international negotiations over Iran's nuclear policies, combined with changes to the economic sanctions against Iran, may lead to an improvement in Iran's relations with the west. Meanwhile we can pray for all the victims of the country's policy of arbitrary detention.

### **Myanmar**

On 1 February 2021 the army of Myanmar launched a coup against the government of Aung San Suu Kyi which had won an election the previous year by an overwhelming majority. Since then popular resistance to the army has been constant, with hundreds being killed in demonstrations, thousands, including the civilian government, detained and thousands of others attempting to flee the country. There is a danger of civil war.

The sort of government which the army would establish is typified by its treatment of one of the detainees, a teacher and community

organiser called Zaw Myat Lynn. He was an active member of Aung San Suu Kyi's party and had been fearless in his opposition to the coup. He was arrested by the army on 8 March. Twenty four hours later his wife was instructed to identify his body. Officials told her that he was killed while trying to escape but, on looking at the remains, it was obvious that he had been brutally tortured. There was severe bruising, a stab wound in his abdomen apparently inflicted while he was still alive and horrific wounds to his face.

Aung San Suu Kyi, meanwhile, faces various charges which could carry a long sentence. She is greatly respected within Myanmar but is also still a prisoner and the army has now gone so far and aroused so much popular opposition that it is difficult to envisage a peaceful compromise emerging between the army and the civilian government.

### **North Korea**

At the beginning of February the UN human rights office issued a report on North Korea's prisons, following an earlier report in 2014. From interviews with former detainees it found that the prisons are still rife with torture, murder and forced labour.

North Korea denies the existence of political prison camps but the report said that there is evidence that political prison camps run by the security forces still exist.

Michelle Bachelet, the UN high commissioner for human rights, said "Not only does impunity prevail but human rights violations that may amount to crimes against humanity continue to be committed."

### **Germany/Syria**

In a landmark ruling a court in Germany has convicted a former member of President Bashar al-Assad's secret police of facilitating the torture of prisoners. Eyad al-Gharib was sentenced to four and a half years in prison. Gharib went on trial together with Anwar Raslan, a more senior official, whose trial is expected to end in October. Both men had

defected to Germany where Raslan was recognised by some of his former victims and he and Gharib were arrested by the German authorities in 2019.

During the trial over a dozen Syrians gave evidence about the appalling abuses they had suffered at the hands of both men. Some were heard anonymously for fear of reprisals against relatives still in Syria. Gharib's sentence is the first legal ruling asserting that the Syrian government was responsible for crimes against humanity. Alas, there are still around 120,000 people who have been imprisoned by Assad and are unaccounted for.

### **The United Kingdom**

The Overseas Operations Bill has passed nearly all its stages as it goes through parliament but amendments to it are still being considered in the House of Lords. There are fears that, as currently drafted, the bill would make it substantially less likely that the UK's service members on overseas operations would be held accountable for serious human rights violations amounting to international crimes. However an amendment passed in the Lords on 13 April ensured that a presumption against prosecution did not apply to war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide. It remains to be seen whether the Commons will accept the amendment in the final reading of the Bill.

Michelle Bachelet has urged the British government to consider the many concerns which have been raised about the bill. She said "The ability of the UK's courts to resolve the most serious allegations against military personnel, with the independence and fairness for which they are known throughout the world, should be maintained and strengthened, rather than be cut back..."

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