

BEARFACTS

Notes from Bear Creek Church July 21 2019

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At this week's Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, billed as the largest human rights event the US State Department has ever held, 30 people were invited to share theirs or their loved ones' stories of religious persecution. Below are the 13 Christian survivors from 13 nations:

China: **Ouyang Manping** is the wife of Pastor Su Tifan, who on December 9, 2015, was placed under administrative detention after law enforcement raided the Three Living Stone Church.

Cuba: **Reverend Mario Félix Leonart Barroso** is currently the pastor of the Iglesia Bautista de Waldorf (Baptist Church of Waldorf), where he ministers to the Latino community. While in Cuba, he planted and pastored Baptist churches in the province of Villa Clara and in Havana. In 2016, after years of being harassed, detained, and arrested multiple times because of his faith activities, Pastor Leonard, his wife, Yoaxis, and his two daughters sought asylum in the United States. They arrived in the United States on September 11, 2016.



Egypt: **Demiana Kamal Youssef Shehata Hanna** is a survivor victim of the November 2, 2018, attack in the governorate of al-Minya, in which armed assailants attacked three buses carrying Coptic pilgrims to the Saint Samuel the Confessor Monastery in al-Minya, killing seven and wounding 19. In addition to being among those attacked, she spoke to the assailants. She was identified with the assistance of Coptic Orthodox Bishop Makarios, bishop of al-Minya, the governorate with the highest incidence of sectarian attacks and tension. She would be accompanied by a male relative: Youssef Nady Youssef Shehata Hanna.

Eritrea: **Helen Berhane**, a gospel singer from Eritrea, was arrested in 2004 after refusing to sign a document pledging to end all participation in Evangelical Christian activities. Beaten and imprisoned, she spent 32 months in a shipping container without adequate ventilation, light, sanitation or food. While imprisoned, authorities regularly tortured Berhane. In 2006, a severe and sustained assault by a prison guard almost killed her and left her unable to walk. Eritrean authorities released Berhane from prison in 2006 and she then escaped to Sudan. Berhane wrote about her experiences in her autobiography, "Song of the Nightingale," released in 2009. She ultimately received asylum in Denmark and continues to recover from her injuries.



Malaysia: **Wife of Pastor Raymond Koh**, the pastor kidnapped on a highway by at least 15 men in three black SUVs on CCTV in February 2017 with no proof of life since. Police say one demand for money was opportunistic but that there is no evidence to the pastor's whereabouts. There are possible links to Koh's role as a Christian activist at a time when Malaysia was moving to enforce stricter Islamic laws.

The pastor was accused of proselytizing Muslims in 2011, and a box containing two bullets, with a note in Malay threatening his life, was sent to Koh's house. On April 3, the country's civil rights commission ruled that that the disappearance probably was the act of the national police intelligence branch.

Iran: **Pastor Mojtaba Hosseini**, age 30, was one of the leaders of a quickly growing house church movement in Iran. After receiving a probation sentence in 2009, he was imprisoned in 2012 and released in 2015.

Iraq: **Father Thabet Habib Yousif**, Chaldean Catholic Priest from Karamles, Ninevah. When ISIS came, the residents of Karamles fled. Fr. Thabet remained behind to ensure everyone fled and ensure his congregation was cared for in displacement. He helped organize accommodation, food, and work. When Karamles was liberated, he was one of the first to return home and help coordinate rebuilding. These efforts included extending assistance for the small remnant of Shabak families also returning.

Nigeria: **“Esther,”** 20, is from Gwoza in southern Borno. She was held captive by Boko Haram for over three years. During her captivity, she experienced terrible trauma—from witnessing how people died to surviving sexual abuse. She escaped and was rescued by the military. But her escape did not bring the freedom she had long hoped and prayed for. She was kept in near-prison conditions until a Christian doctor was able to reconnect her with her family. Her family now welcomes her but local gossip attacking her daughter Rebecca as a “Boko Haram Child” was very hurtful. With some help, she has become stronger and ignores the public hate.

North Korea: **Ill Yong Joo** is a 23-year-old student who defected from North Korea in 2008 at the age of 12. Joo has been an active advocate in the past year. He visited the Department in October 2018 as a Liberty in North Korea Advocacy Fellow. For 10 years, his family listened to South Korean radio, including Christian broadcasting, which was one of the motivating factors for their escape.

He said, “Even listening to foreign radio is considered a crime against the state. If I had been caught, I could have been executed.” His father escaped first, years before he, his mother, and sister crossed the Tumen River, trekked across Southeast Asia, and finally resettled in South Korea after five months of traveling. His father is now a missionary in South Korea.

Sri Lanka: UK-based father of an Easter bombing victim, **Matt Linsey**, lost two children in the attack and has done press engagements to discuss the attacks.

Sudan: **Meriam Yahia Ibrahim** was charged with apostasy and adultery in May 2014 for marrying a Christian man. She was raised by her Christian mother and identified as Christian but her father was Muslim and left her to be raised by her mother. She refused to renounce her Christian faith and was sentenced to death row. She was detained when she tried to leave the country after her release in July 2014 and now lives in the US.



Turkey: After practicing his faith in Turkey for more than 20 years, **Pastor Andrew Brunson** was imprisoned in October 2016 on false charges without a trial until the spring of 2018. The Turkish government presented no evidence that he was guilty, when finally indicted in April 2018, on charges referencing “Christianization” and religious activity, which raised questions about religious freedom in Turkey and indicated that he has been targeted because of his faith. He was released in October 2018 after a few “show” trials.

Vietnam: **Pastor A Ga** oversaw 12 house churches associated with the Montagnard Evangelical Church of Christ of Vietnam in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. After several detentions and over 40 police interrogation sessions involving torture, he and his immediate family fled to Thailand in 2014. In 2017, the Vietnamese government issued an arrest warrant against him. The Thai police arrested him, his wife, and their son. Due to US intervention, Pastor A Ga and his family resettled in the US as refugees in September 2018.