

2022: THE YEAR TO CAMPAIGN TO END THE PERSECUTION

Fiona Bruce MP

FIONA BRUCE, MP AND THE PRIME MINISTER'S SPECIAL ENVOY FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF, HOPES THAT, FOR THOSE PERSECUTED SIMPLY FOR WHAT THEY BELIEVE, THIS YEAR MAY BE DIFFERENT.

For most of us there is a positive sense of new beginnings at the start of a year. But for too many around the world there is little which is positive to look forward to.

There will be no New Year celebrations for Maira Shahbaz, a 14-year-old Christian schoolgirl in Pakistan. Maira was kidnapped last year from just outside her home: raped, 'forcibly married', forced to convert to Islam and even when she managed to escape, found no justice through the legal system there, and is now living in hiding with her family - all of them in fear for their lives.

Neither will Chang Weiping be able to look forward to this New Year. He is a lawyer in prison in China, forced to sit on a tortuous 'tiger chair' for up to six days at a time, and facing round the clock interrogations, subjected to prolonged sleep deprivation, with a lack of adequate food and hygiene facilities. All of this because he represented clients in support of their freedom of religion or belief.

Nor will Valentina Baranovskaya, a 70-year-old Jehovah's Witness woman, be looking forward to 2022 with her family. She is in prison in Siberia for breaching the Russian criminal code - as is her son. Simply for being a member of her faith - the Jehovah's Witnesses are a banned extremist organisation there.

And teenage Christian Leah Sharibu, kidnapped along with 113 other schoolgirls by Boko Haram in Nigeria, will spend her fourth year apart from her mother Rebecca. Brave Leah is the only one of those schoolgirls not to have been released - because she has refused to renounce her faith.

Neither will Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo, leader of the Monte de Sion Independent Church in Cuba be with his wife Maridilegnis and their children. He has been detained in prison, charged with crimes including 'disrespect' and 'public disorder,' at risk of a ten year prison sentence and subject to brutal beatings. Maridilegnis says 'I have been married to Pastor Lorenzo Rosales for more than 20 years and we have served God since then. He is not a criminal; he is a man of God. I am very afraid for his life, my children and I plead for help - cries for help which we lift up to God.'

All of this has happened to these people, and is happening to countless millions of people of different faiths and beliefs



Cuban Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo and his wife Maridilegni Carballo (Photo courtesy of CSW)

around the world today - simply because of what they believe. Yet, the right to believe is a fundamental one - as Article 18 of the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights states: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes the freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.' But today, that is far from a reality for many around the world - believers are losing their jobs, their education, their homes, their livelihoods, their families, their freedom, their access to justice, and even life itself. They cannot meet with others to worship, they are being discriminated against, marginalised, beaten, threatened, tortured and killed.

And the extent of this in the 21st century is not only simply staggering but largely unrecognised - it is estimated that over 83% of the world's population live in a country where their right to practice their faith or belief is restricted, for many severely, and often by their own government. It is also estimated that 80% of the persecution globally is against Christians. And this gravely disturbing phenomenon is growing. Even during the Covid pandemic, members of religious groups around the world have been scapegoated - blamed and ostracised - as responsible for the pandemic in their countries and excluded from health treatments to alleviate it.

Do you remember the campaign started by the churches in this country called: 'Stop the Traffik?' This campaign ultimately led to the government passing the Modern Day Slavery Act to tackle the scourge of human trafficking - particularly of young girls into prostitution - in this country. So people of conscience, by engaging and campaigning, can make a difference!

As the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, I am therefore initiating a new campaign - 'End The Persecution', encouraging people from churches across the country to come together to champion freedom of religion or belief and to support those in other countries who are persecuted, in the hope that many of them will be able to approach this year with hope, rather than fear or dread. To find out how you and your local church can support this campaign please see www.endthepersécution.uk

For more information about freedom of religion or belief and the worldwide persecution of so many, visit Christian Solidarity Worldwide's website - www.csw.org.uk

Fiona Bruce has been Member of Parliament for Congleton since 2010. She is Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Pro-Life Group in the House of Commons and is the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief.



Fiona Bruce MP in the House of Commons with Mervyn Thomas, Founder President of CSW meeting Rebecca Sharibu, mother of abducted Nigerian schoolgirl, Leah. (Photo courtesy of Fiona Bruce MP).



So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.

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