

Persecution Watch

Jailed Canadian Pastor Cleared of Spy Charges

A military tribunal cleared a Canadian pastor jailed in Lebanon of charges that he was a spy for Israel. Bruce Balfour, 52, field director of Cedars of Lebanon, a ministry that was planning to help replenish the cedars of Lebanon in the country's northern region, was arrested at Beirut's airport July 10. Judicial sources said he was jailed on charges of working with the Jewish state to spy on Shiite Muslim Hezbollah guerrillas and the Lebanese army, Reuters reported. On Sept. 1, the court found Balfour innocent of espionage, but ruled that he was guilty of stirring religious strife, court sources said. It sentenced him to one year in jail, but reduced it to the time already served. Grant Livingston, another Canadian pastor charged with espionage, was also cleared, Agence France-Presse reported.

Australia

The Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV) and three Australian Muslims took two pastors to court after the pair made critical statements about Islam on a Web site and during a Christian seminar in March 2002, The Barnabus Fund (BF) reported. Danny Nalliah and Daniel Scot could receive significant fines if they are found guilty of committing blasphemy against Islam under the Victorian Racial and Religious Vilification Act, passed in 2001 to promote intercultural and interfaith harmony in Victoria. The case was due to be heard in mid-October in Victoria, which is located in the country's southwest region. Many Christians in the state fear the ICV is using the case to stifle all criticism of Islam or Muslims, BF said.

Turkmenistan

Police recently banned members of a Baptist congregation from meeting for services, threatening them with fines if they continued to meet. The raid occurred in late August during a Sunday service in the town of Balkanabad, located in the country's western region, Forum 18 News Service reported. Leaders said the church has been targeted for several raids this year, and members have been fined the equivalent of \$48 each for gathering for worship services in July and August. The church is not registered with the authorities. Turkmenistan has the harshest religious policy of all the former Soviet republics, Forum 18 said. Authorities recognize no faiths except Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church.