

U.S. Christian workers remain jailed in Afghanistan

A British journalist imprisoned with Dayna Curry and Heather Mercer noted the 'inner strength' of their faith

As U.S. bombs fell on and around Kabul, Afghanistan, in October, Taliban officials targeted by the bombing continued to imprison two American Christian women and others accused of spreading Christianity in the strict Islamic state. The two Americans, jailed since August, also endured a squalid environment of cockroaches, scorpions and mice, yet exhibited "a tremendous inner strength," according to a British journalist who was imprisoned briefly with the women.

Dayna Curry, 29, and Heather Mercer, 24, were arrested in Kabul on Aug. 3 along with four Germans and two Australians, all workers with Shelter Now International (SNI), a German-based relief organization. Also arrested were 16 Afghans. Christian materials attributed to the 24 workers allegedly were found in an Afghan home.

Curry and Mercer, charged by the Taliban regime in Kabul for the crimes of "insulting Islam and spreading Christianity," shared for a short time a cell with Yvonne Ridley, 43, a reporter for The Daily Express newspaper.

Ridley had been arrested in Afghanistan in September allegedly for sneaking into a Taliban-controlled part of the country without a visa and was held for 10 days before being released in early October. Writing of her experience after her release, Ridley said she was with the two women for a short time in a filthy cell that the Taliban later attempted to make more

hygienic.

Taliban authorities on Oct. 6 offered to release the two American women if the United States would stop its military action against Afghanistan. U.S. officials immediately dismissed the offer, reiterating President Bush's firm stance first expressed during an address to Congress on Sept. 20 that he would not negotiate with the Taliban.

The offer came from the Taliban's Foreign Ministry in Kabul within days after the presiding judge on the case said international reactions to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington would not influence the trial.

Curry's and Mercer's parents and U.S. diplomats were denied access to the closed trial, which began Sept. 5 but has been delayed due to ongoing retaliatory strikes by the United States throughout Afghanistan. As U.S. military attacks began in early October, Pakistani lawyer Atif Ali Khan was attempting a 10-hour trip to Kabul to represent the relief workers. Khan was to submit his formal written defense to the Taliban Supreme Court at press time for this report.

If convicted, the Westerners could face imprisonment and expulsion or more serious sentences. The Afghan Islamic Press quoted Taliban Chief Justice Mawlawi Noor Mohammad Saqib as saying, "If they have broken the law and should be hanged, then we will punish them like that." The 16 Afghans arrested could face the death penalty.

Within hours after the Sept. 11 attacks in the United States, Western diplomats who were in Afghanistan representing the eight foreign workers evacuated Kabul. Before being forced to

leave the country on Sept. 14, Curry's and Mercer's parents appealed to the Taliban to release their daughters.

Addressing a press conference in Islamabad, Pakistan, on Sept. 17, John Mercer, father of Heather Mercer, said he pleaded with the Taliban to let him take his daughter's place in jail. "It was a very serious offer. I would do it," the Associated Press reported. There were no indications the authorities would accept his offer.

Compass Direct reported that chief Taliban spokesman Abdul Hai Mutmaen said, "We will try to protect them if America attacks."

Pastor Jimmy Seibert of Antioch Christian Community Church (ACCC) in Waco, Texas, where Curry and Mercer were active members, said fervent prayer from churches around the world would be the key to unlocking the Taliban's prison doors. ACCC members have been meeting at the church around the clock since August to pray for the women's release. They say they are expecting a miracle such as the one in Acts 12 that resulted in the apostle Peter being freed.

"We're believing that we will see them face to face again, just as Peter returned to his praying church and gave his testimony," Seibert said.

Curry and Mercer are graduates of Baylor University in Waco and were active in ministry to the poor in Texas before beginning their work in Afghanistan.

-C. Hope Flinchbaugh