

After Beheadings, Can Love for Persecutors Spark Revival?

A sudden spike in violence targeting Christians in Tanzania has finally given way to a threat.

Todd Nettleton, a spokesman for the Voice of the Martyrs USA, explains, "There have been threats made regarding Easter. That is one concern."

Another threat is a recent propaganda campaign.

"There are leaflets, apparently, being circulated saying that Christians should respond with violence, and they should come back and attack the Muslims in retaliation for these attacks that have happened on Christians. So there really is the potential for a lot of upheaval this Holy week, as we head into Easter Sunday."

Christians are calling for prayers, and for peace and reconciliation, in the wake of the violence. Over the last four months, a handful of attacks against church leaders in Tanzania have left believers in the Eastern African nation concerned over the future of **religious freedom**. Nettleton attributes some of that to an alarming shift.

"Some of that is the rise of **radical Islam** within the country. There is some evidence of links between radical Muslims in Tanzania—particularly on the island of Zanzibar, and al-Shabaab in Somalia."

In fact, wherever **Islamic militants** appear to be bent on wiping out all Christians, there have been corresponding upticks in attacks on churches, leaders, death threats and murders.

More recently, Nettleton adds, "We're seeing more persecution in Tanzania than we've seen in past years, and that really has brought it [Tanzania] to the attention of others who monitor religious freedom and persecution around the world." That's borne out in the Open Doors World Watch List for 2013. It's a compilation of the 50 countries most noted for the persecution of Christians. Tanzania, never having been on the list before, ranks 24th now.

The situation begs the question of whether or not these are isolated events or symptoms of a larger issue. Believers are concerned and wary, says Nettleton.

"One of my coworkers was in Tanzania last week to encourage and meet with persecuted Christians—Christians who have already faced persecution," he notes. "There is definitely a concern about what's going to happen."

However, he goes on to say that, "one of the things that affect the spread of the gospel is the way that Christians respond to persecution."

For example, the widow of one of the murdered church leaders is a mother of 12. With her husband dead, she can no longer stay in the parsonage. In one fell swoop, she's lost both her husband and her security. Yet, says Nettleton, she's forgiven her husband's murderers.

"Basically," he explains, "she echoed the words of Christ on the cross: 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they're doing.' That can really be the seed of the gospel, because that's a supernatural thing. That's not a human response."

The unusual response may be exactly what's needed in a volatile situation.

"That's a supernatural response," he says, "and that makes the persecutors ask that question, 'How can you respond that way?'"

How can you respond with love to the people who killed your husband?' That can really be the seeds of **revival**."

Pray that pressure from **Islamic extremists** will be resisted and freedom of religion protected. Pray for protection for church leaders on Zanzibar and Pemba islands. Pray that Christians will have courage to share God's love with Muslims.