

Pastor Sentenced to Three Years in Bhutan Prison

The Bhutan High Court sentenced Gospel for Asia-supported missionary *Ugyen Tashi to three years in prison for “attempting to promote civil unrest” for showing a film about Jesus.

On May 21st, carrying a generator and a projector, Ugyen walked for two days into interior villages of Bhutan with a single purpose—to give people a chance to learn about Jesus. But when one of the village chiefs learned of the movie’s content, he informed the chief of his district, who then called the police to arrest Ugyen.

The days following the arrest were a whirlwind of investigations, questionings, postponements, police statements and waiting. While police investigated his case, Pastor Ugyen was kept in a small, dark, mosquito-filled room along with three other inmates.

On June 14, the police attempted to search Pastor Ugyen’s house, but they were unable to enter because the house was locked. In need of more information, the police sent a team to the villages where Ugyen showed the Jesus film to reinvestigate and conclude whether people were converted through the screening.

The police summoned the village chiefs and others present at the showing and asked them a series of questions concerning what happened the night of Ugyen’s arrest. Both Christians and non-Christians presented statements for Ugyen’s case. Ugyen’s case eventually made its way to the district court as he patiently waited in his jail cell and continued to share the Good News with his fellow inmates, all the while enduring harsh living conditions, which aggravated his asthma.

“Pastor Ugyen said he is not sitting idle, and though he is not able to share openly, he is making the best of every opportunity he is getting to share the Good News of Jesus,” a GFA field correspondent reported. “There are a few inmates who are interested.”

When GFA leaders came to visit the prison, Ugyen asked for a supply of New Testaments to distribute to the inmates and encouraged his visitors not to worry about him. On July 22, two months after Ugyen’s arrest, he was taken to court for the first phase of his hearing—after multiple postponements and cancellations.

GFA leaders had initially met with local officials to appeal for Ugyen’s release on bail, but the officials refused their petition because they considered Ugyen’s case very serious and a possible violation of Bhutan’s constitution, which states that “No person shall be compelled to belong to another faith by means of coercion or inducement.”

Ugyen was asked to write a statement for the court, but his first statement was considered insufficient. Nine times Ugyen rewrote his statement, paying \$ each time.

On August 17, the court presented all of Ugyen’s statements in the presence of the officials and asked Ugyen to screen the controversial film on the life of Jesus before the court the following day. Although it was reported that the court officials wanted to watch all the films Ugyen had shown before a final verdict was pronounced, the film was never shown.

Bhutan’s High Court declared Ugyen guilty and gave him three years in prison.

Bhutan is one of the least evangelized nations, according to Operation World. This is due in part to the country’s deliberate isolation from other cultures. The government and its people seek to protect their ancient traditions, their way of life and especially their religion.

Bhutan's constitution states that "Buddhism is the spiritual heritage of Bhutan, which promotes the principles and values of peace, non-violence, compassion and tolerance," yet Christians have often been persecuted for their faith even though their constitutional right grants them freedom of religion as long as they weren't compelled by coercion to convert to Christianity.

Please pray for Pastor Ugyen while he is in prison. Pray for his health, and that he will be able to effectively minister while he's behind bars. Pray also for the other believers living in Bhutan. Pray for their protection, strength to endure persecution, and discernment on how to share the Good News with those around them.