

Priest Thought to Be Brutally Crucified Is Alive, Well and Out of Custody

India's church, government and politicians from across the political landscape have all expressed relief and joy over the release of Salesian Father Tom Uzhunnalil, kidnapped in Yemen in March 2016.

Statements hailing the release of the Indian priest have poured in—from India's foreign minister, Sushma Swaraj, to the president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, Cardinal Baselios Cleemis.

"I am happy to inform that Father Tom Uzhunnalil has been rescued," tweeted Swaraj at 3:40 (IST), breaking the news to the nation.

Apart from thanking the Indian government for its efforts in securing the priest's release, the Catholic Bishops' Conference in its statement thanked "Pope Francis, who took personal interest in Fr. Tom's release efforts, and Bishop Paul Hinder, vicar apostolic of Southern Arabia, the bishop in charge of the Middle East, and the Sultan of Oman, for their untiring efforts".

In fact, the news of Uzhunnalil's release was made public after the priest had been flown to Muscat in a military aircraft.

A statement quoting the state-run Oman News Agency, published in the Oman Observer, said Uzhunnalil "expressed thanks to God Almighty" following his release. "In compliance with the His Majesty, Sultan Qaboos bin Said, Oman, in coordination with the Yemeni parties, have managed to find a Vatican priest," said the state-run news agency's statement. "He has been

transferred to Muscat, from where he will return to his home in Kerala. Tom Uzhunnalil, a Vatican priest, expressed thanks to God Almighty and appreciation to His Majesty Sultan Qaboos. He also thanked his brothers and sisters and all relatives and friends who called on God for [his] safety and release.”

Father Joyce Francis from Bangalore, part of the Salesian order to which Uzhunnalil belongs, also confirmed the news to World Watch Monitor. “We are thrilled. There are no words to describe our joy,” Uzhunnalil’s cousin, V.A. Thomas, told World Watch Monitor from the family’s native Ramapuram parish.

“People are excited and distributing sweets,” added Thomas, who had been headmaster to Uzhunnalil when he was a student in the local Catholic school in the 1970s.

“I got the news from a contact in Muscat,” Major Archbishop Cardinal George Alencherry, head of the Syro Malabar Church, to which Uzhunnalil belongs, told World Watch Monitor, after leading a thanksgiving prayer at St. Mary’s Basilica in Kochi.

“Father Tom is now being taken to the Vatican,” Cardinal Alencherry confirmed to World Watch Monitor, contrary to earlier news reports that he was being flown to Kerala.

Cardinal Alencherry had earlier called for special prayers and candlelit vigils after a video was released of the visibly ailing priest in captivity.

Background

Uzhunnalil, 58, was abducted from the Missionaries of Charity home for the elderly in Aden on March 4, 2016. During the raid, unidentified gunmen killed four Indian nuns, two Yemeni female staff members, eight elderly residents and a guard.

Originally from the Indian state of Kerala, Uzhunnalil had worked in Yemen for 14 years, moving to the care home in 2015 after Aden’s Holy Family Church, where he served, was set on

fire.

In March 2016, a false rumor circulated that the Islamic State group had crucified Uzhunnalil on Good Friday. But then at Christmas 2016 a video of him in captivity surfaced, with the visibly unkempt and ailing priest—who is diabetic and has high blood pressure—urging the government of India and the church to ensure his release.

That led to a series of assurances from the Indian government, while the Catholic Church organized several demonstrations, including a day of prayer and candlelit vigils, urging the government to ensure the kidnapped priest's safe release.

A second video appeal by the priest surfaced on the internet in May 2017, with the priest stating that serious efforts had not been made by the church or the government to ensure his release.

Uzhunnalil, speaking slowly in English, said: "They are treating me well to the extent they are able. My health condition is deteriorating quickly, and I require hospitalization as early as possible."

In July 2017, Yemen confirmed to India's foreign minister that Uzhunnalil was still "alive."

After the second video emerged, his cousin, V.A. Thomas, said his family had been "consistently pleading with everyone to ensure Father Tom's release" and had called on several top government leaders.

Thomas added that he had led a four-member Uzhunnalil delegation to meet P. Sathasivam, the Kerala governor, along with Oommen Chandy, former chief minister of Kerala, on May 31.

Three days earlier, the federal government had dispatched Richard Hay, a Christian Member of the Indian Parliament (who

had been nominated by the ruling BJP government), to the family in Palai, to assure them that the government was making serious efforts “to bring the back the priest home safely.”

Christianity in Yemen

Following the March 2016 attack, initial media reports blamed Ansar al-Sharia, but the Islamist group, which is linked with Al-Qaeda, denied responsibility. Later, the attack was blamed on the Islamic State group.

Militants from both IS and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula have exploited the chaos and lawlessness prevailing nationwide since Yemen’s civil war erupted in 2015.

“We knew that the situation was difficult and that the sisters were running a certain risk,” Bishop Paul Hinder, apostolic vicar of the Arabian Peninsula, said after the four nuns were murdered.

“The Missionaries of Charity died as martyrs,” he told Catholic News Agency. “For me there is no doubt that the sisters have been victims of hatred—hatred against our faith.”

He added that he believed they were targeted because certain radical groups in Yemen “simply do not support the presence of Christians who serve the poorest of the poor”.

However, he said this violent Islamist attitude “obviously goes against the mainstream thought of the Yemeni people, the majority of whom appreciate the presence of the Missionaries of Charity as well as their dedicated service to the poor”.

Back in July 1998, three sisters of the Missionaries of Charity were shot dead by a Muslim extremist near the nuns’ clinic for the elderly and impoverished in Hodeidah. The apprehended killer, who told police he would “go to heaven for this deed,” accused the nuns of trying to convert Yemenis to Christianity.

Four of Mother Teresa's convents were set up in Yemen after the invitation of the the- northern government in 1973. The Catholic sisters still serving in these convents in Hodeidah, Taiz, Sanaa and Aden care for mentally and physically challenged children and elderly people. {eo}

This article originally appeared on World Watch Monitor.