

ALGERIA – “YOU CAN SEAL OUR CHURCHES BUT NOT OUR HEARTS”

“You can seal our churches but you can’t seal our hearts” is the cry from Algeria as churches are being sealed shut despite Article 42 of the Algerian Constitution guaranteeing its citizens freedom to worship and the freedom to meet for a service. The 15 October closure of the largest of these – the 1,200-member Full Gospel Church of Tizi Ouzou – has also halted live television broadcasts of the weekly services by Christian broadcaster SAT-7.

Pastor Salah Challah, the President of the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA) and senior pastor of the Full Gospel congregation, has been highlighting the situation since he and leaders of two other large churches received notification that their buildings were to be closed immediately, on 15 and 16 October.

“We do not know how far this will go and what are the intentions of our authorities,” he said in a video message shared on social media. He appealed to fellow believers to “join us in prayer because the situation is critical”.

Nevertheless, Mr Challah said authorities “can seal our churches but not our hearts”. This has been demonstrated in a series of posts shared by the Algerian churches. Several posts show members of the Full Gospel church worshipping outside its locked doors on a staircase, while another shows protesters praying outside the 100-member Light Church in Tizi Ouzou on the day it was closed.

Since November 2017, over a dozen of the country’s churches have been closed.

Rita El-Mounayer, International CEO of SAT-7, comments: “Since 2012, SAT-7 has been broadcasting worship services from the Full Gospel Church of Tizi Ouzou on our Arabic channel. The enthusiastic response we receive from viewers shows how much these are valued by our Algerian viewers.

“We pray that the doors of these Algerian churches will soon be unlocked and that our fellow Christians there will have the freedom to worship they enjoy so much.”



Prayer † News



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Pastor Challah leads prayer on the staircase outside the locked church in Algeria

MAKING HOPE VISIBLE

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SPEAKING GOD’S LOVE INTO VIOLENCE IN IRAN

A wave of protests erupted across Iran in November. Internet access was cut, and over 200 people were killed when the protests were met with violence. SAT-7 viewers have been sharing their worries, fears and prayers with the Audience Relations team, who have been available 24/7.

In a phone call, Shohreh*, a distraught and weeping viewer from Iran, reveals something of the atmosphere Iranians have endured in the past month:

“These have been such hard days. Being cut-off from the internet has been the least of our problems; we have experienced so much persecution... So many have gone on strike and so many have been arrested, harmed and killed. We have had an awful time and have felt totally alone. God alone knows what we have endured.”

“On the streets it has been military rule; so many police and soldiers. I am sorry that I can’t stop crying. We are believers and yet feel this way – I feel sorry for those who do not have the Lord during these dark days that have been filled with pain”.

Uncensored and continuing to broadcast God’s love to people in Iran via satellite, SAT-7 PARS has been a valuable source of comfort and encouragement to its viewers at a time when Iranians have felt cut off from the world. “I truly thank God for you who have been our consolation during these difficult days. Watching your programs have been an encouragement to us”, shares Shohreh.

“We are telling viewers, that we are available 24/7 and are praying for them and for peace” says Panayiotis Keenan, the Executive Director of SAT-7 PARS. “We want our viewers to know that there is a huge family outside of Iran praying for them.”

“Our viewers pray for a better future *in* the country because they believe leaving Iran is not the answer. They ask us to pray and support them in this”, explains Keenan.

“Please pray for Iran!”

SAT-7 PARS is committed to standing with Iranians during this especially difficult period in their long history.



IRAQ'S CHURCHES CRY OUT

While Iraqi demonstrators have been calling out to be heard by their rulers in some of the largest protests since the fall of Saddam, SAT-7 viewers heard that churches in Iraq are crying out to God for their nation.

Rev Joseph Francis, the President of the Christian Alliance Churches in Iraq, told SAT-7 worship and prayer show, *Keep on Singing*, "The crisis has awakened our hearts as believers to pray for our precious nation. We encourage all believers to pray for us."

Pastor Francis said that churches are holding continuous prayer nights and told viewers, "The people are in a state of protest against corruption... seeking their rights, their freedoms, civil rights, and justice.

"We are close to the protesters and following the events closely," he added. "We offer help, support, love and the message of Jesus Christ among the supporters and security forces."

Mass anti-government protests erupted in October in Baghdad and other central and southern cities of Iraq, provoked by corruption, unemployment and poor public services. As the crisis continued and demonstrators were met with live rounds and tear gas, SAT-7's Arabic channel was offering support to Iraqi viewers.

Viewers of *Close Up*, a special live discussion program, heard that some Christians had gone beyond giving demonstrators their moral support. Speaking from Iraq, Salwan, a TV director and writer, told how he had gone to the protests five or six times. He said, "They are peaceful and positive, but the country is shooting people and using tear gas extensively. They are arresting activists and kidnapping them."

Salwan paid tribute to the courage of demonstrators and tuk-tuk drivers who ferried injured people from the Baghdad protests. He was especially encouraged

by their unity despite their different religious and political backgrounds.

"We want to live in peace and security," he said. "I hope to see my country free of political and religious divisions."

"Our role is to return to God"

Asked how Christians should respond to the crisis, he said, "The same words that God told Jonah of the people of Nineveh and their wickedness coming up before Him applies to us now. The role of Christians in Iraq is to repent and return to God. We are not many in numbers and don't have the power to make a change, but we trust that our prayers will be answered just as Nehemiah prayed and his prayers were answered."

Thinking of the over 300 people who have died in the protests, Rev Yousif Khalid Mikha, pastor of the Chaldean Church in Beirut said, "The person who is hurting most because of all the events in Iraq is God Himself. He is the Father of all those people with their different religions and denominations. He sees and is pained by how a father and a son are killing one another."

Bishop Yatron Koliana of the Assyrian Church of the East highlighted the vulnerability of Iraq's Christian community, which has seen its numbers fall from an estimated 1.5 million to 250,000 since 2003. Despite the efforts of those who "want to clear the Middle East of its Christians", he said, "we trust that Jesus promised that He would never abandon us. He overcame the world and that's our hope."

Even SAT-7's popular children's programme, *Family of Jesus*, heard from Iraqi viewers. One of them, 14-year-old Rola, led viewers in praying "for the liberation of Iraq, to return to what it was like before". She asked God to "Come with your glory over all the martyrs, the injured, the oppressed. I have faith that You will shine with your light and glory over Iraq."

Prayers for Iraq

"We encourage all believers to pray for us," stated Revd Joseph Francis. The country of Iraq and Christians of the region are crying out for prayers. Join us in praying for Iraq, and for God to bring healing and peaceful solutions to the struggles of the nation.



MEET OUR VIEWERS

Please pray for the following viewers while reading their messages:

FROM A VIEWER IN AFGHANISTAN

"Each time our satellite dish gets confiscated, we buy a new one. Give thanks because we can watch your programs when no one else is around."

FROM A CHILD VIEWER IN LEBANON

"In the past I couldn't forgive people, but I pray daily to Jesus and ask Him to fill my heart with a forgiving spirit. Pray with me."

FROM A VIEWER IN AFGHANISTAN

"My brother was tortured and killed for being a Christian. I was consumed by hate... until I forgave the Taliban. Pray for those weak in their faith, as I once was, that they may be strengthened."

FROM A TEENAGE VIEWER IN IRAN

"My 15-year-old brother and I were smuggled into Iran. Pray I can teach him to read, that we can read the Bible together, and we can find peace."

FROM A VIEWER IN TURKEY

"People at work pressure me to go to their non-Christian prayers. I can't even read my Bible here, because I will be fired and I need this job."

FROM A VIEWER IN OMAN

"We have no church and feel like we are the only Christian family in our country. We memorise songs and Bible verses from SAT-7 KIDS. Pray they will continue, for they encourage us."