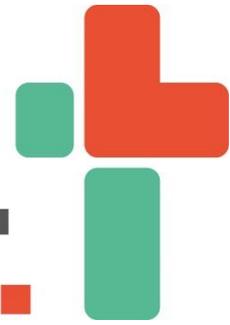


CHRISTIANS ON THE LEFT.



The Balkans – Prayer guide and brief update March 2017

A ripple across the waters, a wind through the valley

Over the last few years it has been a great delight to be part of a programme called Ambassadors for a better world, which consists of Renewing our minds (focusing on conflict resolution and personal transformation in leadership), and EDI (looking at developing ideas around economics, diplomacy and integrity). This forum has brought together experts from all over the Balkan region and across the world to help train young people in leadership.

A result of this has been to listen to and work with those who lived through conflict and now hope and pray for a ripple on the water and a wind of peace through the valleys. In the last few years we have seen and felt a growing game of political chess being played, where borders are disputed and ethnic nationalism from the hard left and far right are being played out. This is made worse by economic and political tensions in Macedonia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina especially when it comes to unemployment, and pressure of the refugee crisis with camps in Serbia and Macedonia. There are many problems around the Kremlin's influence/interference, seen as helpful by some and by others as a highly destabilising and dangerous factor. Concern remains that the European Union has better things to worry about than the Balkan region and Brexit has led to a distinctly unsettling wind. Before there was certainty that the EU would always stabilise the Balkans, however Brexit and the election of Donald Trump have led to a concern that those who seek to do harm within the region will be allowed to turn the tide however it suits them.

While the talk of a large scale armed conflict remains distant (Macedonia and Kosovo being the highest security concerns with violent protests) and in no way wanted among the people, disputes and tension are becoming stronger. The distinction between what is nationalism and patriotism an ongoing conversation with far reaching consequences. Human rights issues, corruption and disputed Governments all remain a threat to a lasting peace. Macedonia currently has no formally recognised Government and protests are ongoing. In Kosovo, violent protests and an ongoing security situation in areas remain tense, all leading to eyes that perhaps took a fragile peace for granted to look again and for the church to hope and pray for continued lasting peace.

In the mist of this the refugee crisis remains perhaps the biggest area of instability. Yet this is also the area of most hope and opportunity, for in this situation a ripple and whisper is occurring, when some showed the world how to love there came new communities. Refugees giving their life to Christ, and those who fled persecution finding new homes. In Croatia, a group of 30 Iranian Refugees

have established the first Iranian Christian Community in Zagreb, they are now awaiting approval of their asylum requests. The Community in Zagreb is being given practical assistance such as legal and integrational assistance, they also help with protection, for being a convert to Christianity as a refugee in the camps comes with its own dangers.

The refugee crisis has also opened up tensions with border disputes, and highlighted nationalism within countries. Macedonia has declared the north and south boarder areas as crisis zones. Pastors I often visit in Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro are working hard to train young leaders who will not forget the lessons of the past and will stand against hatred, practice forgiveness and look for a better way, a way forged deep in Christ.

In the midst of this let us keep praying for hope and change, for Kingdom to come and for extraordinary people to keep rising up who will lead in areas of diplomacy, business, human rights, politics, journalism, the arts.

Let us pray

For the refugee crisis - that solutions will be found and for people to keep finding Christ. For those who are hungry to be fed, and that they will be clothed and loved. That Political solutions are matched with practical action.

For the peacemakers – let us pray that those who are working on boarder disputes and hoping to solve ethnic tensions will find wisdom. That dangerous nationalism from the far right and far left with give way to pride in a country matched with love and hope. That the stranger will always find a home.

For economic solutions – In Bosnia and Macedonia pray for solutions to boost jobs and the economy. That people will find dignity and a country not seen as a failed state but as a success.

For protection – let us pray that the hands of those who seek to harm, cause mischief and upset are stayed, and that international bodies do not forget the region that is vast and contains so many identities.

For Churches – that they would continue to be a source of hope and strength and not find themselves in a political game of chess.