

Table of Contents

- ***Algerian Muslims block Christmas service***
-

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Neighborhood residents protest new church building in Kabylie region

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct News (31.12.2009) / HRWF Int. (04.01.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Nearly 50 Muslim members of a community in northern Algeria blocked Christians from holding a Christmas service on Saturday (Dec. 26) to protest a new church building in their neighborhood.

As Algerian Christian converts gathered for their weekly meeting and Christmas celebration that morning, they were confronted by protestors barring the doors of their church building. Tafat Church is located in Tizi-Ouzou, a city 100 kilometers (62 miles) east of the Algerian capital, Algiers. Established five years ago, the church belongs to the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA). Until recently it met in a small rented building. In November it opened its doors in a new location to accommodate the growing needs of its nearly 350 congregants.

The local residents protesting were reportedly irritated at finding that a church building with many visitors from outside the area had opened near their houses, according to an El Watan report on Sunday (Dec. 27). The daily newspaper highlighted that the residents feared their youth would be lured to the church with promises of money or cell phones.

"This land is the land of Islam! Go pray somewhere else," some of the protestors said, according to El Watan. Protestors also reportedly threatened to kill the church pastor.

The protestors stayed outside the church until Monday (Dec. 28), and that evening some of them broke into the new building and stole the church microphones and speakers, according to the pastor, Mustafa Krireche. As of yesterday (Dec. 30) the church building's electricity was cut.

One of Algeria's Christian leaders, Youssef Ourahmane, said he could not recall another display of such outrage from Algerians against Christians.

"It was shocking, and it was the first time to my knowledge that this happened," said Ourahmane. "And there weren't just a few people, but 50. That's quite a big number ... the thing that happened on Saturday was a little unusual for Algeria and for the believers as well."

A few weeks before the Saturday incident, local residents signed a petition saying they did not want the church to operate near their homes and wanted it to be closed. Local authorities presented it to the church, but Ourahmane said the fellowship, which is legally authorized to exist under the EPA, does not plan to respond to it.

On Saturday church leaders called police, who arrived at the scene and told the Christians to go away so they could talk to the protestors, whom they did not evacuate from the premises, according to local news website Kabyles.net. The story Kabyles.net published on Sunday was entitled, "Islamic tolerance in action at Tizi-Ouzou."

"In that area where the church is located, I'm sure the people have noticed something happening," said Ourahmane. "Having hundreds of Christians coming to meet and different activities in the week, this is very difficult for Muslims to see happening there next door, and especially having all these Muslim converts. This is the problem."

A local Muslim from the neighborhood explained that residents had protested construction of the church building in a residential area, according to El Watan.

"What's happening over there is a shame and an offense to Muslims," he told El Watan. "We found an old woman kissing a cross ... they could offer money or mobile phones to students to win their sympathies and sign them up. We won't let them exercise their faith even if they have authorization. There's a mosque for those who want to pray to God. This is the land of Islam."

Behind the Scenes

Ourahmane said he believes that Islamists, and maybe even the government, were behind the protests.

"Maybe this is a new tactic they are trying to use to prevent churches from meeting," he said. "Instead of coming by force and closing the church, the local police use the Muslim fundamentalists. That's my analysis, anyhow."

In February 2008 the government applied measures to better control non-Muslim groups through Ordinance 06-03. Authorities ordered the closure of 26 churches in the Kabylie region, both buildings and house churches, maintaining that they were not registered under the ordinance.

Despite efforts to comply with the ordinance, many Christian groups indicated they were blocked by lack of information, bureaucratic processes or resistance to their applications, according to this year's International Religious Freedom Report by the U.S. Department of State. None of the churches have closed since then, but their status continues to remain questionable and only valid through registration with the EPA.

"If we have the right to exercise our faith, let them tell us so," Pastor Krireche told El Watan. "If the authorities want to dissolve our association through legal means, let them do so."

Recent growth of the church in Algeria is difficult for Muslims to accept, according to Ourahmane, despite public discourse among the nation's intellectuals advocating for religious freedoms. Unofficial estimates of Christians and Jews combined range from 12,000 to 40,000, according to the state department report. Local leaders believe the number of Algerian Christians could be as many as 65,000.

Increasing numbers of people who come from Islam are like a stab for the Muslim community, said Ourahmane.

"It's hard for them to accept that hundreds of Christians gather to worship every week," he said. "It's not easy. There are no words to explain it. It's like a knife and you see someone bleeding ... They see the church as a danger to Algerian culture."

The Algerian government has the responsibility to face up to the changing face of its country and to grant Christians the freedom to meet and worship, said Ourahmane.

"The local authorities and especially the Algerian government need to be challenged in this all the time," he said. "They have to be challenged: 'Don't you recognize the situation here?' I mean we're talking of tens of thousands of believers, not just a few."

There are around 64 churches in the Kabylie region, where most Algerian Christians live, as well as house groups, according to Ourahmane. The Kabylie region is populated by Berbers, an indigenous people of North Africa.

"There are lots of healings and deliverance, and people are experiencing new things in their life," Ourahmane said of the Algerian churches. "They are finding hope in Christ which they have never experienced before."

There are half a dozen court cases against churches and Christians. None of these have been resolved, frozen in Algeria's courts.

False Accusations

In ongoing negative media coverage of Christians, last month Algerian newspaper Echorouk published a story claiming that the former president of the EPA, who was deported in 2008, had returned to Algeria to visit churches, give advice and give them financial aid.

The report stated that the former EPA president, Hugh Johnson, was known for his evangelism and warned readers of his evangelizing "strategies."

Yesterday Johnson told Compass by telephone that the report was pure fabrication, and that he has not set foot in Algeria since he was deported.

Johnson's lawyers are still trying to appeal his case in Algerian courts.

This year church groups stated that the government denied the visa applications of some religious workers, citing the government ban on proselytizing, according to the state department report.
