

Table of Contents

- ***Two evangelists in Ethiopia released from prison***
 - ***Jailed Evangelists in Ethiopia win appeal but remain in prison***
 - ***Prison terms upheld for two Christians in Ethiopia***
 - ***Convert languishing in jail in Ethiopia for handing out Bibles***
-

Two evangelists in Ethiopia released from prison

Judge acquits Christians falsely accused of insulting Ethiopian Orthodox Church

By Simba Tian

Compass Direct (28.10.2009) / HRWF Int. (29.10.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – The latest in a series of false charges against two Ethiopian evangelists was put to rest on Friday (Oct. 23), and they were released.

A court in Debiretabor, Ethiopia acquitted the two evangelists of insulting the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) in prison, an accusation made by fellow inmates after the two were jailed on false charges of offering money for people to convert. The charge that the two Christians insulted the EOC was orchestrated by EOC members both inside and outside the prison, according to area church leaders.

Temesgen Alemayehu and Tigist Welde Amanuel had been sentenced to prison for six months on the false charge of offering money to people to convert but successfully appealed the punishment; after a lower court in Amhara state had thrown out their appeal on Sept. 21, the State Supreme Court in Bahir Dar ordered them to be released after paying a 500 birr (US\$40) fine.

Before they could be released, however, inmates signed a petition raising the second charge against Alemayehu and Amanuel. On this charge of insulting the EOC while in prison, the judge rejected witnesses' testimony as contradictory and of no value.

"Thank you to those who prayed for us," Alemayehu said after his release, adding that he was eager to return to ministry.

"The enemy has tried to frustrate us and delay our freedom," said Amanuel. "But through prayers and God's intervention, we are now released from prison. We thank those who prayed on our behalf."

Alemayehu and Amanuel, of Wengel Lealem church in Addis Ababa, had gone to Debiretabor, Amhara state in July to help establish a church.

"Temesgen and Tigist are extremely happy to again reunite with the church," said a Christian source, adding that the two evangelists would return to Addis Ababa.

On July 22 they had appeared at district court in Debiretabor to hear charges against them that they were offering money and gifts to people to change their religion; Christian sources said witnesses falsely testified to that effect. Members of the EOC produced the false witnesses, the sources said.

Alemayehu and Amanuel were incarcerated for three months and six days.

They would have been released after their sentences were reduced to the fines, but on Oct. 7 the district prosecutor claimed they would not appear for the next court date, and the judge decided to keep them in prison. Church leaders in Debiretabor said Alemayehu was suffering from kidney infections and had sought permission to get treatment, but prison officials refused.

Debiretabor is the seat for the south Gondar Zone administration in Amhara state. As in the rest of Amhara, Debiretabor's population is predominantly EOC with hostile attitudes towards evangelicals.

The two Christians' arrests stemmed from a July 19 incident in which passersby began to question them as they were preaching on a roadside. Christian sources said a heated argument led to a group attack on the two evangelists, wounding Alemayehu. Amanuel sustained minor injuries, the sources said.

Christian sources said a group within the EOC called "Mahibere Kidusan" ("Fellowship of Saints") had incited members to attack the two evangelists as they were proclaiming Christ. The increasingly powerful group's purpose is to counter all reform movements within the EOC and shield the denomination from outside threats.

In some cases, the sources said, EOC priests have urged attacks against Christians, and government authorities influenced by Mahibere Kidusan have infringed on Christians' rights.

Jailed Evangelists in Ethiopia win appeal but remain in prison

Ethiopian Orthodox Church members said to orchestrate new charge of 'insulting' church

By Simba Tian

Compass Direct (08.10.2009) / HRWF Int. (09.10.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – Two Christians in Ethiopia who had been sentenced to six months of prison on false charges of offering money to people to convert have successfully appealed their sentence, only to be kept in prison on a new charge.

After a lower court in Amhara state threw out their appeal on Sept. 21, the State Supreme Court in Bahir Dar last week ordered Temesgen Alemayehu and Tigist Welde Amanuel to be released after paying a 500 birr (US\$40) fine each, Christian sources said. But the two Ethiopian evangelists are still in prison awaiting the result of a new charge that fellow inmates filed for allegedly insulting the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) while in prison.

Alemayehu and Amanuel, of Wengel Lealem church in Addis Ababa, had gone to Debiretabor, Amhara state in July to help establish a church. On July 22 they appeared at district court in Debiretabor to hear charges against them that they were offering money and gifts to people to change their religion; Christian sources said witnesses falsely testified to that effect.

Members of the EOC produced the false witnesses, the sources said. Alemayehu stated that his only sin was telling of his faith in Christ to interested persons and that he had a

constitutional right to do so, but the judge sentenced him and Amanuel to six months of prison.

An appeal they filed at the high court in Debiretabor was thrown out, forcing them to appeal to a higher court (see www.compassdirect.org, "Prison Terms Upheld for Two Christians in Ethiopia," Sept. 25).

Last week, the sources said, the regional State Supreme Court accepted their appeal, reducing the sentence to the fine and ordering their release after they paid it; the guilty verdict, however, remained.

Yesterday, as the evangelists were appearing before the court in Debiretabor regarding the decision of the Supreme Court in Bahir Dar, a new charge was brought against them, Christian sources said: Inmates had signed a petition asking the district prosecutor to prosecute them for insulting the EOC while in prison.

Church leaders in Debiretabor believe that the charge was orchestrated by EOC members both inside and outside the prison.

The judge set Oct. 14 for the two Christians to appear in court to answer to the new charge. At yesterday's hearing the district prosecutor opposed the release of the two evangelists, claiming they would not appear for the next court date. The judge decided to keep them in prison at least until the Oct. 14 hearing.

The maneuver shattered the two Christians' hopes of being released, church leaders said.

"We are asking for the continuation of prayers," said one church leader who requested anonymity for security reasons. "We are thinking of reporting to the State's Supreme Court in Bahir Dar and see what would be the next move."

Church leaders in Debiretabor said the condition of the imprisoned Christians is worsening. Alemayehu was said to be suffering from kidney infections and sought permission to get treatment, but prison officials refused.

Debiretabor is the seat for the south Gondar Zone administration in Amhara state. As in the rest of Amhara, Debiretabor's population is predominantly EOC with hostile attitudes towards evangelicals.

The two Christians' arrests stemmed from a July 19 incident in which passersby began to question them as they were preaching on a roadside. Christian sources said a heated argument led to a group attack on the two evangelists, wounding Alemayehu. Amanuel sustained minor injuries, the sources said

Christian sources said a group within the EOC called "Mahibere Kidusan" ("Fellowship of Saints") had incited members to attack the two evangelists as they were proclaiming Christ. The increasingly powerful group's purpose is to counter all reform movements within the EOC and shield the denomination from outside threats.

In some cases, the sources said, EOC priests have urged attacks against Christians, and government authorities influenced by Mahibere Kidusan have infringed on Christians' rights.

Prison terms upheld for two Christians in Ethiopia

Judge rejects appeal of evangelists said to be falsely accused of offering money, gifts

By Simba Tian

Compass Direct (25.09.2009) / HRWF Int. (29.09.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – An Ethiopian court on Monday (Sept. 21) threw out an appeal by two evangelists said to be falsely accused of offering money and gifts to people to convert to Christianity, thus upholding their six-month prison sentences.

Temesgen Alemayehu and Tigist Welde Amanuel of Wengel Lealem church in Addis Ababa went to Debiretabor, Amhara state, to plant a church in July. After a week in the area, according to area Christian sources, their proclamation of Christ led several people to confess their sins and receive Him as Savior.

On July 19, however, some passersby began to question the two evangelists, and Christian sources said a heated argument led to a group attack on the two evangelists, wounding Alemayehu. Amanuel sustained minor injuries, the sources said, but managed to escape to a nearby home; the mob followed her into the compound, demanding she be handed over to them.

The homeowners refused, saying they would not cooperate with criminals and would instead hand her over to police. "I would not allow any attack against the woman," the unidentified owner of the home said, according to one church leader.

Police arrived at the scene of the attack and protected Alemayehu from the violent band, made up of members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), and took him into custody. The attacking group accused Alemayehu and Amanuel of insulting their religion.

Christian sources said a group within the EOC called "Mahibere Kidusan" ("Fellowship of Saints") had incited members to attack the two evangelists as they were proclaiming Christ on the roadside. The increasingly powerful group's purpose is to counter all reform movements within the EOC and shield the denomination from outside threats.

In time the EOC attackers fabricated accusations of offering money or gifts to make converts, Christian sources said, but under police questioning Alemayehu and Amanuel said they had only shared their faith to interested people without making such offers. They also tried to explain to police that it was their constitutional right to do so.

Police, however, submitted the attackers' false statements to the district prosecutor, Christian sources said.

False Testimony

On July 22, Alemayehu and Amanuel appeared at district court in Debiretabor to hear charges against them. A charge sheet claimed that they were caught offering money and gifts to people to change their religion, and Christian sources said witnesses falsely testified to that effect.

The next day, the court delivered a guilty verdict. Alemayehu stated that his only sin was telling of his faith in Christ to interested persons, and that he had a constitutional right to do so. The judge sentenced him and Amanuel to six months of prison.

Police immediately transferred both Christians to Debiretabor prison.

"There is an open conspiracy between judges, police and prison officers," the church leader said. "Police speeded up the investigation and brought it to the district prosecutor's attention within a day. Witnesses were organized to falsely testify at court. The judges passed the sentence refusing the right to defense."

Debiretabor is the seat for south Gondar Zone administration in Amhara state. As in the rest of Amhara, Debiretabor's population is predominantly EOC with hostile attitudes towards evangelicals, Christian sources said. They added that churches already operating in Debiretabor and surrounding areas meet with continued EOC resistance.

In some cases, the sources said, EOC priests have urged attacks against Christians, and government authorities influenced by Mahibere Kidusan have infringed on Christians' rights. It was unknown if the judge and police officers in Alemayehu and Amanuel's case were under the influence of Mahibere Kidusan, but the local church leader said there were signs of bias in the case.

"Prison officials are handling both believers with harsh treatments, and after all these, no one is questioned for either the process or its result," the church leader said. "We are waiting for God's intervention on all this."

In the rejection of the appeal, the high court judge said that he found "no mistake of law interpretation" to change the verdict of the lower court, a Christian source said.

"That means now the two believers have to serve the six-month sentence unless they appeal and achieve something at the regional State Supreme Court," he said. "We heard that the two are thinking of appealing at the regional State Supreme Court in Bahirdar soon."

Amanuel is assigned to a cell where criminals including serial killers are serving their terms, a source said, and they have threatened her. Both she and Alemayehu continue to share their faith in Christ with other inmates, in spite of insults from the prisoners.

Church leaders in Debiretabor said they brought the case to the attention of the regional state vice president, and that he sent his representative to visit Alemayehu and Amanuel in prison. The representative discussed the situation with the district court and with police. Sources said the visits, however, only exacerbated conditions for the two Christians by upsetting prison officers.

Starting on Aug. 26, prison officials forbade visits to Amanuel and Alemayehu for at least 15 days. They also stopped food from being brought them, a common practice among all prisoners whose relatives are able to help them.

"I went on Aug. 20 to meet them in prison, but officers at the gate told me that they have an order to stop any visitor," the church leader in Debiretabor said. "I think our report to the regional authorities made some contribution to this decision."

Convert languishing in jail in Ethiopia for handing out Bibles

Leader in Christian-Muslim relations accused of 'malicious' distribution

By Simba Tian

Compass Direct News (15.09.2009) / HRWF Int. (16.09.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – A convert from Islam who has led a push for Muslim-

Christian understanding in Ethiopia has been in jail for nearly four months since his arrest for "malicious" distribution of Bibles.

Christian sources in Ethiopia said that, contrary to Ethiopian law, 39-year-old Bashir Musa Ahmed has not been formally charged since his arrest on May 23 in Jijiga, capital of Somali Region Zone Five, a predominantly Muslim area in eastern Ethiopia. Zonal police arrested him after he was accused of providing Muslims with Somali-language Bibles bearing covers that resemble the Quran, the sources said.

An Ethiopian national, Ahmed is known as a bold preacher of Christianity and is credited with opening discussion of the two faiths between Christian and Muslim leaders. He is well-known in the area as a scholar of Islam, but his case has gone largely unreported in Ethiopia.

A source who requested anonymity said authorities likely are secretly planning to transfer Ahmed from his Jijiga cell to Ghagahbur jail, in part to prevent other Christians from visiting him and in part because he has not been charged.

The source told Compass that Ahmed's own relatives and tribe instigated the arrest with the intent of stopping him from spreading Christianity in the region, whose 5 million predominantly Muslim inhabitants are mainly of Somali origin.

"The Ethiopian constitution allows for religious tolerance," said the source, "but to date Ahmed has not been taken to court. He is still in the cell now, going on the fourth month, which is quite unusual for an Ethiopian nationality and the constitutional requirements."

For providing Bibles with cover pages resembling the Quran, Ahmed is accused of "maliciously" distributing Bibles and trying to convert Muslims to Christianity, although conversion and manifesting one's faith are not illegal in Ethiopia. At issue is whether the Bibles with covers resembling the Quran violate copyright issues and disrespect Islam.

Christian converts in the area said the kind of Bible that Ahmed distributed is widely available on the market in Ethiopia and is commonly used by Somali Christians inside and outside of the country.

Following a recent visit to Ahmed, the source said he looked strong in faith but seemed to have lost weight and was in need of clothes.

"I am doing fine here in prison, but it is a bit unfortunate that some of my close friends who claimed to advocate and serve the persecuted Christians have not come to see me," Ahmed told the source. "I am thankful for those who have taken their time to come and see me as well as advocate for my release."

Sources said hostility toward those spreading faith different from Islam is a common occurrence in Muslim dominated areas of Ethiopia and neighboring countries. Christians are subject to harassment and intimidation, they said, to stem a rising number of Muslim converts.

"In God's own time I know I will be set free," Ahmed told the source. "Continue praying for me. I know it is God's will for me to be here at this time and moment in life."

Ethiopia's constitution, laws and policies promote freedom of religion, but occasionally local authorities infringe on this right, according to the U.S. Department of State's 2008 International Religious Freedom Report. An estimated 40 to 45 percent of Ethiopia's population belongs to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, evangelical and Pentecostal groups make up an estimated 10 percent of the population and about 45 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, according to the report.

In Ethiopia's federal state system, each state is autonomous in its administration, and most of those holding government positions in Somali Region Zone Five are Muslims.
