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Zanzibar evicts congregation from government building

Officials on Tanzanian island cite 'renovations,' but pastor sees pandering to Muslims

By Simba Tian

Compass Direct (22.06.2009) / HRWF Int. (23.06.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – A pastor in Zanzibar City said his church is without a worship place after government officials, at the instigation of radical Islamists, evicted the congregation from their rented building on Tanzania's Zanzibar Island off the coast of East Africa.

With just two days' notice, government officials ordered Christians of the Church of God Zanzibar from their rented government building effective April 19, ostensibly to pave the way for renovations. But two months later, said pastor Lucian Mgaywa, no renovation work has begun and none appears to be forthcoming.

The government has not only failed to renovate the building but has since turned it into a business site, Pastor Mgaywa said. The church had been worshipping in the building since October 2000.

In evicting the church from its building in the Kariakoo area of Zanzibar City, Pastor Mgaywa said, the government gave in to partisan demands.

"Our being told to vacate the premise by the government was a calculated move to disintegrate the church and to please the Muslims who do not want us to be in this particular area," he said.

Forced to rent different worship venues each week, the congregation can no longer bear the financial burden that comes with it, said Pastor Mgaywa.

"Hire venues are available, but we can no longer afford it due to limited finances," he said. "Reasons for our being kicked out are purely religious."

The church's 50 members had seen signs that the eviction was coming. With increasing frequency Muslim youths had passed by the church hurling insults because they felt Christians had intruded on their territory, Pastor Mgaywa said.

"The church had been experiencing stone-throwing on the roof of the building by the Muslims during worship service," he said. He added that since the eviction notice, members of the congregation have been increasingly harassed by area Muslims.

Pastor Mgaywa said that after receiving the order on April 17 to vacate by April 19, the congregation sought an audience with the acting director of the Zanzibar Social Security

Fund, identified only by his surname of Hassan. Officials, however, rejected the church's request to continue using the premises.

Otherwise, when the government gave two days' notice to vacate the premises for "renovations" to be carried out, the congregation obliged; they did not seek legal redress, he said, as they had trusted that officials' stated intentions were genuine.

Now that the congregation is left without site options, the pastor said, he has been visiting members in their homes to worship together.

Shut-downs and attacks are not unknown on the predominantly Muslim, semi-autonomous island as a resurgent Christian movement makes inroads. On May 9 Muslim extremists expelled Zanzibar Pentecostal Church worshippers from their rented property at Ungunja Ukuu, on the outskirts of Zanzibar City (see www.compassdirect.org, "Radical Muslims Drive Church from Worship Place in Zanzibar").

The attackers had been angered by a recent upsurge in Christian evangelism in the area. Radical Muslims had sent ominous threats to the Christians warning them to stop their activities.

The church had undertaken a two-day evangelism campaign culminating in an Easter celebration. On the morning of the assault, more than 20 church members had gathered for Saturday fellowship when word reached them that Muslim extremists were about to attack. As the radical group approached, the Christians fled in fear of their lives.

In predominately Sunni Muslim Zanzibar, churches face other hurdles. There are restrictions on getting land to build churches, open preaching is outlawed and there is limited time on national television to air Christian programs. In government schools, only Islamic Religious knowledge is taught, not Christian Religious Education.

Zanzibar is the informal designation for the island of Unguja in the Indian Ocean. The Zanzibar archipelago united with Tanganyika to form the present day Tanzania in 1964.

Muslim traders from the Persian Gulf had settled in the region early in the 10th century after monsoon winds propelled them through the Gulf of Aden and Somalia. The 1964 merger left island Muslims uneasy about Christianity, seeing it as a means by which mainland Tanzania might dominate them, and tensions have persisted.

Church in Kenya struggling after Islamists destroy building

Six months after attack, Muslim assailants still at large; weary congregation faces heat, rain

By Simba Tian

Compass Direct News (05.03.2009) / HRWF Int. (06.03.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Six months after a gang of Muslim youths ruined a church building in this town in northern Kenya, Christians still worshipping in the sweltering heat of the open air say they feel disillusioned that officials have done nothing to punish the culprits or restore their structure.

On a sunny afternoon last Sept. 14, when angry Muslim youths threw more than 400 members of the Redeemed Gospel Church out of their church building, the Christians

hoped they would be able to return to the ruins of their former structure. That hope is quickly giving way to anger, hopelessness and despair.

"After six months in the open, the church feels tired and cheated," said pastor David Matolo. "We are fed up with the empty promises from the government administration."

He said the church, which began worshipping in Garissa in early 2001 with only a dozen members, is fast shrinking.

"Our church membership has decreased, which is of great concern to me," he told Compass. "The church thinks that the government has decided to buy time – almost every month I do book appointments with the relevant authorities, who on several occasions have given us a deaf ear."

Since the attack, church members have been meeting at the town show grounds. Just a few miles from the Somali border, the site has few trees to protect the congregation from the scorching sun, with temperatures ranging from 92 to 104 degrees F (30 to 40 degrees C).

Asked why he thought government officials were reluctant to grant the church a permanent place of worship as promised, an irritated Matolo did not hesitate to reply.

"The administration has decided, 'kutesa [inflict pain on us],' always making promises that never come to pass," he said. "At times the provincial commissioner deliberately decides not to take my phone calls. I have had a painful experience."

Matolo said he has asked the administration either to allow the church to build a new structure on land lying idle near a police training college or to let them return to their original site. "We are ready for any eventuality," he said. "We feel that the administration is not concerned about our spiritual welfare."

Asked about the pastor's complaints, provincial police officer Stephen Chelimo told Compass, "The issue at the moment is not within my docket, but wholly rests upon the provincial commissioner."

But Provincial Commissioner Stephen Maingi said the onus rested on the district commissioner. "Let the district commissioner sort this issue with the pastor," Maingi said.

District Commissioner Onyango Ogango, in turn, indicated the church itself was the source of problems.

"If the church is allowed to return to their original site, we will expect a fight to erupt with the Muslims," Ogango said. "Earlier on, the church began very well during its initial stage of inception with controlled worship, but later it turned out to hold noisy prayers and loud songs."

Further questioned about these allegations, however, Ogango said he would call the pastor to discuss a resolution. Even so, Matolo said previous contact with the district commissioner did not leave him with high expectations.

"Our district commissioner seemed to have no feelings for our predicament," he said. "The faces of the congregation members speak a lot."

A glance at the worshippers confirmed his appraisal. They looked weary and anxious, with impending April rains expected to add to the indignity of their situation. Matolo said his congregation feels that soon it will be difficult to worship at all.

Even a temporary home did not appear to be forthcoming. The pastor said their request for a site near the provincial commissioner's residence was dismissed on the grounds that it would create a security concern.

Radical Islamic Influence

Tensions between Christians and the Muslim-majority population in the semi-desert town of 20,000 people began in June 2007, when Muslims built a mosque too close to the church building – only three meters separated the two structures.

Matolo said pleas to District Commissioner Ogango did nothing to reverse the encroachment of Muslim worshippers.

Land issues alone have not been responsible for tensions in the area. The Rev. Ibrahim Kamwaro, chairman of the Pastors' Fellowship in Garissa, said Matolo had offended Muslims when he preached to a lame Muslim man. Muslims were said to be upset that the pastor persuaded the disabled man to stop going to the mosque and instead join his church.

Matolo's alleged promise to the disabled man of a better life offended area Muslims, Rev. Kamwaro said.

Christians feel increasingly hunted and haunted as the spread of Islamic extremism is fast gaining ground in this town, located about 400 kilometers (249 miles) from Nairobi, the capital. In neighboring Somalia, newly elected President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed on Feb. 28 offered the introduction of sharia (Islamic law) in exchange for a truce with a rebel extremist group said to have ties to al Qaeda, al Shabaab; the rebels said they would keep fighting. Many fear that Muslim youths in this lawless part of Kenya will be tempted to adopt the radical, uncompromising posture of the fighters.

To date, the gang of more than 50 Muslim youths who attacked worshippers and brought their church to ruins have not been apprehended. Members of the congregation feel justice is increasingly elusive.

In Garissa, Muslims restrict churches in other ways. Christians are not allowed to pray, sing or use musical instruments in rented homes owned by Muslims. No teaching of Christian Religious Education in schools is allowed; only Islamic Religious Knowledge is taught.

Garissa has more than 15 Christian denominations, including the East Africa Pentecostal Church, the Redeemed Gospel Church, the Anglican Church, Deliverance Church, Full Gospel Churches of Kenya and the African Inland Church.

Canadian missionaries beaten in Kenya face attackers in court

By Jamie Komarnicki

Canwest News Service (13.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (15.01.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A Canadian missionary couple viciously beaten this summer while working in Kenya has returned to the east African country to face the men accused of attacking them.

Eloise Bergen took the stand in a Kitale courtroom Tuesday and recalled the brutal July attack, said daughter-in-law Robyn McGough.

Though she hadn't yet spoken Tuesday with Eloise and John Bergen, both from Vernon, B.C., McGough said she received text-message updates of the courthouse drama, including news that a commotion broke out when the nine prisoners were led in, forcing police to bring the courtroom under control.

Eloise Bergen, 66, was punched, choked and cut with machetes, and raped several times during the July 9 home invasion; her husband, John, 70, was beaten, knocked out and left for dead in the bushes outside their Kitale home.

Some of the men implicated in the attack worked as security guards at the couple's home.

The couple returned to Kenya with their son Joshua on Jan. 5.

McGough said they decided to testify against the alleged attackers after threats were made against their friends left behind.

"They went back there to protect those people," she said.

The Bergens, who returned to Canada to recuperate, have spent the past months travelling across North America, talking about their ordeal and fundraising for future missionary projects.

They've since raised enough money to fund their dream of starting an orphanage and plan to stay in Kenya until February to scout out land for the project, McGough said.

"They're amazing people. They're doing really good, despite everything," she said.

"They're looking forward to getting this portion of their life passed, so they can carry on with this work they're so passionate about."

The trial is expected to resume Jan. 27, she said.
