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Incitement to break Ramadan fast to be prosecuted

AFP/ NRC Handelsblad (15.09.2009) / HRWF (17.09.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Six young Moroccans are being prosecuted for trying publicly to incite to break the Ramadan fast.

On 13 September, the protesters took action in Mohammedia, 80 km south of Rabat, against the law which penalizes the non-implementation of the fast, according to a security official.

It is the first time in Morocco that a group of people publicly demonstrates for the right not to follow Ramadan. The Council of the Islamic Scholars of Mohammedia has labeled them "agitators".

Five foreign Christians deported from Morocco

Female visitors said to be merely attending Bible study with fellow believers

Compass Direct (31.03.2009) / HRWF (01.04.2009) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The Moroccan government announced on Sunday (March 29) it had expelled five foreign female Christians for trying to "proselytize" in the Islamic country, although sources said they were foreign visitors merely attending a Bible study with fellow Christians.

The accused women were among 23 tourists, expatriates and Moroccans arrested in Casablanca on Saturday during what the Interior Ministry called a "proselytizing" meeting involving Moroccan citizens. Police seized numerous pieces of evangelistic "propaganda," including Arabic books and videos.

But a source told Compass that everyone in attendance was a Christian and that they had merely gathered for a Bible study, which he said falls within Morocco's constitutional right of freedom to express one's faith.

Arriving at the meeting at 5 p.m., 18 plainclothes police officers arrested all in attendance and transported them to a police station. They were detained and questioned until 5 a.m. Sunday morning.

"This was a great humiliation for these women, most of which were of the same family, to be arrested as criminals," the source said.

Prior to the arrest, all the materials at their meeting had received official government approval. Those in attendance included 15 Moroccan women and one man, two female expatriates of Iraqi and U.S. origin, and the five women visiting Casablanca on the group's invitation. The women the government called "missionaries" – four Spaniards and

one German – were deported to Spain via ferry, according to Morocco’s official MAP news agency.

While the decision to expel the five women indicated lack of religious freedom in Morocco, it likely has more to do with a Moroccan bias against missionary activity in general, not against Christian evangelism per se, said Elliot Abrams, senior fellow for the Council on Foreign Relations.

Morocco severed ties with Iran in early March on suspicion that the latter was supporting Shiite Islamic missionary activity, which officials believed would disrupt the unity of the 99-percent Sunni country. Earlier this month a Shiite school was closed after accusations that it was attempting to convert students, and rights groups claim that about a dozen people have been arrested for allegedly converting to Shiite Islam, according to The Associated Press.

In light of these moves, Abrams said, the government would have been hard-pressed to allow Christian activities the five women were suspected of undertaking after it shut down Islamic missionary enterprises.

“[Morocco] is generally more sensitive about missionary activity, and cannot be seen to allow Christian activity while stopping Muslim activity,” he said.

A Christian worker agreed with this assertion. He said the government may be attacking Christians “for balance,” even if they are only having a Bible study, after launching an initiative against Shiites.

The North African country prides itself on its religious freedom and tolerance. The constitution provides for freedom to practice one’s religion, but Article 220 of the Penal Code criminalizes any attempt to induce a Muslim to convert to another religion.

Official church leaders pounce

Without directly mentioning the women, representatives of Morocco’s official churches swiftly condemned all forms of “proselytism” – a term with a pejorative connotation of asserting one’s will, as distinct from “evangelism,” or proclaiming Christ for people to respond freely – adding that the role of the nation’s churches is only to guide Christians on their “spiritual quest.”

Archbishop of Rabat Monsignor Vincent Landel and Chairman of the Evangelical Church in Morocco Jean-Luc Blanc issued a joint statement that Catholics and Muslims should focus on dialogue, which “by definition rules out proselytizing activities.”

“This dialogue has an intellectual and theological dimension and copes with the social and cultural realms,” they wrote. “Thus, Christians are engaged in various activities alongside Muslims, share the same values and goals and are not afraid of showing their differences.”

Blanc pastors a French Pentecostal church in Casablanca, a congregation mostly made up of expatriates from across Africa. He has criticized independent foreign mission groups, mainly out of worry that they could upset a delicate religious balance in the Sunni Muslim country.

Catholic and Protestant churches have been operating in Morocco for more than a century, and “have learned over the years to live in harmony with the country and its people,” he said in the statement.

In 2007 the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Endowments claimed that foreign missionaries had converted more than 3,000 people to Christianity, particularly in remote areas of the country, according to the 2008 U.S. Department of State Report on International Religious Freedom.

But a source with contacts in Morocco said that radical Islam is perceived as far more of a threat than evangelical Christianity.
