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Two church buildings burned down in Zanzibar

Young radical Muslims suspected in attacks on island off coast of East Africa

By Simba Tian

Compass Direct (30.06.2009) / HRWF Int. (02.07.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Two church buildings were razed Sunday night (June 28) on the Tanzanian island of Zanzibar after worship services.

Suspected radical Muslims set the church buildings on fire on the outskirts of Unguja Township, on the island off the coast of East Africa, in what church leaders called the latest incidents of a rising tide of religious intolerance.

“We don’t want churches on our street,” read a flier dropped at the door of Charles Odilo, who had donated the plot on which the Evangelical Assemblies of God in Tanzania (EAGT) building stood. “Today we are going to burn the church, and if you continue we are going to burn your house also.”

With Christian movements making inroads in the Muslim-dominated area, the EAGT church and a Pentecostal Evangelical Fellowship in Africa (PEFA) church building a few miles away were burned down as a fierce warning, church leaders said.

The PEFA church building was located in the Kibondeni area eight miles from Unguja, and the EAGT structure was in the Fuoni area six miles from Unguja. Samuel Salehe Malanda, pastor of the 30-member PEFA church, said their building doubled as a nursery school on weekdays.

“In this church building there were six benches and a blackboard,” Malanda said. “The children have no place to do their learning. What are we going to do?”

Construction of the PEFA church building was in the final stage of completion last week, area church leaders said, when Masoud Jecha, assistant sheikh of Kibondeni, visited it and threatened Malanda.

“If you do not stop your construction, we will bring down the building,” Jecha told the pastor.

Malanda said the church reported the arson attack to police, who have purportedly begun an investigation, and the congregation has also sought the help of the chief leader of the rural government. The church’s police report included mention of Muslim extremist suspects bent on stopping the spread of Christianity in Zanzibar.

Church leaders said Odilo, who had donated his plot for the EAGT church building, was living in fear of the Islamic militants burning down his house, as they are known for carrying out their threats.

Pastor Paul Makungu said his EAGT church has 29 adult members and 13 children. He has also filed an arson report with local police, who are investigating suspects including radical Muslims and the chief neighborhood leader.

Bishop Obeid Fabian, chairman of an association of congregations known as the Fraternal Churches, said Christians in Zanzibar have received several threats.

"In this latest incident, the threats were spread through pamphlets," he said. "At other times, Muslim youths have hurled stones on church rooftops and insulted Christians."

On May 9 Muslim extremists expelled Zanzibar Pentecostal Church worshippers from their rented property at Ungunja Ukuu, on the outskirts of Zanzibar City.

With no help forthcoming, church members have begun gathering for fellowship in their homes, Fabian said.

In Zanzibar City on April 17, 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 Mgayway, no renovation work had begun, and the government has since turned it into a business site.

The church had been worshipping in the building since October 2000.

"The churches affected since attacks began in April are at a critical stage," said Fabian. "We as church leaders find it very difficult to bring our church members together who are now dispersed with no place of worship. The church needs financial support to get worship places for members as well security. But this seems not forthcoming."

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.

Radical Muslims drive church from worship place in Zanzibar

Authorities do nothing to help threatened Christians in city on Tanzanian island

By Simba Tian

Compass Direct (26.05.2009) / HRWF Int. (27.05.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Sunday worship in a house church near Zanzibar City, on a Tanzanian island off the coast of East Africa, did not take place for the third week running on Sunday (May 24) after Muslim extremists expelled worshippers from their rented property.

Radical Muslims on May 9 drove members of Zanzibar Pentecostal Church (Kanisa la Pentecoste Zanzibar) from worship premises in a rented house at Ungunja Ukuu, on the outskirts of Zanzibar City. Restrictions on purchasing land for church buildings have slowed the Christians' efforts to find a new worship site.

Angered by a recent upsurge in Christian evangelism in the area, church members said, radical Muslims had sent several threats to the Christians warning them to stop their activities. The church had undertaken a two-day, door-to-door evangelism campaign culminating in an Easter celebration.

"Radical Muslims reported the church campaign to [village elder Mnemo] Mgomba, who in turn ordered that no Christian activity to be carried out in his area of jurisdiction," said Obeid Fabian Hofi, bishop of the church.

On the morning of the attack, 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.

"The group was shouting, saying, 'We do not want the church to be in our locality – they should leave the place and never come back again,'" said one church member who requested anonymity.

A Muslim had rented his house to a member of the church, Leah Shabani, who later decided to make it a place of fellowship. The church, which has been in existence for seven years, had reached more than 30 members at the beginning of this year, most of them from the Tanzanian mainland. Without their worship site, Bishop Hofi said, some members are traveling long distances into Zanzibar City to worship.

When the church reported the attack to area chief Jecha Ali, members said, he told them that he could not help them.

"This property is not mine – if the owner has refused to allow you people to pray there, then I have nothing to do," Ali told them.

When Bishop Hofi went to police in Ungunja Ukuu about the attack, officers also told him that the landlord had the right to refuse to rent to the Christian.

"The head of police said he could not help us, arguing that it was the prerogative of the plot's owner to decide who to lease his property to," he said.

Police promised to investigate, but Bishop Hofi said he was not convinced they would take any action against those who had attacked his congregation.

"To date no action has been taken by the police," he said. "I am very concerned about the spiritual situation of my flock, seeing that my appeal has landed in deaf ears. No one is ready to listen to our grievances. We are fighting a losing battle since the administration is headed by Muslims."

Bishop Hofi said he has decided to appeal for prayer and financial support from churches in Zanzibar to buy property for a church building. He said church members have spoken with Mercy Baraza, a Muslim from the Tanzanian mainland, who has pledged to sell her Zanzibar plot to them.

"The church is now raising money with the hope that the members will soon have a place to worship," Bishop Hofi told Compass by telephone. "I know getting the money is easy, but to get someone to sell the land might be difficult, especially for worship purpose, but

we are trusting God for His providence. We shall be very grateful for prayers and any support towards the purchase of the plot for church worship.”

The prospective site is near a police station, he said, giving him optimism that if they obtain it they could worship peaceably.

“It will be a secure place for the church,” he said.

In predominately Sunni Muslim Zanzibar, the church faces numerous 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.

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