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Ethiopia imprisons Christian accused of defacing Quran

Islamic principles govern Somali region in southern part of country

By Simba Tian

Compass Direct (29.11.2010) / HRWF (30.11.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - A Christian in Ethiopia's southern town of Moyale who languished in jail for more than three months after he was accused of desecrating the Quran has been sentenced to three years of prison, church leaders said.

Tamirat Woldegorgis, a member of the Full Gospel Church in his early 30s, was arrested in early August after a Muslim co-worker in the clothes-making business the two operated out of a rented home discovered Woldegorgis had inscribed "Jesus is Lord" on some cloth, area Christians said. His business partner later accused him of writing "Jesus is Lord" in a copy of the Quran, although no evidence of that ever surfaced.

Woldegorgis was sentenced on Nov. 18 for allegedly defacing the Quran and was subsequently transferred to Jijiga prison, a source said. Jijiga is the capital of Ethiopia's Somali Region Zone Five, which is governed by Islamic principles, and his transfer there – after a period in which his whereabouts were unknown – puts his life in greater danger, a church leader said.

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.

"Three years in a harsh jail in Jijiga for an innocent man is quite costly," said the church leader, who requested anonymity for security reasons.

The church is concerned about the condition of the father of two from Hagarmariam village.

Additionally, two of Woldegorgis' friends were fined 5,000 Kenyan shillings (US\$60) each for supporting him by either taking food to him or visiting him while in prison. The two were said to be condemned for supporting a criminal who allegedly desecrated the Quran and allegedly defamed Islam, church leaders said.

Woldegorgis' Muslim associate, whose name has not been established, had gone to a mosque with the accusation that Woldegorgis had written "Jesus is Lord" in the Quran itself, sources said. Angry sheikhs at the mosque subsequently had Woldegorgis arrested for desecrating the book sacred to Islam, they said. Other sources said, however, that Muslims accused Woldegorgis of writing "Jesus is Lord" on a piece of wood, on a minibus and then on the wall of a house.

Sources previously told Compass that authorities had offered to release Woldegorgis if he would convert to Islam.

Hostility toward those spreading faiths different from Islam is a common occurrence in predominantly Muslim areas of Ethiopia and neighboring countries, they said. Christians are often subject to harassment and intimidation.

Ethiopia's constitution, laws and policies generally respect freedom of religion, but occasionally some local authorities infringe on this right, according to the U.S. Department of State's 2010 International Religious Freedom Report.

According to the 2007 census, 44 percent of Ethiopia's population affiliate with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 19 percent are evangelical and Pentecostal and 34 percent are Sunni Muslim.

Christian jailed in Ethiopia accused of desecrating Quran

Constitution flouted as he is jailed for two months in Muslim area without court appearance

By Simba Tian

Compass Direct (07.10.2010) / HRWF (07.10.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A Christian in Ethiopia's southern town of Moyale has been languishing in jail for two months after his Muslim business partner accused him of writing "Jesus is Lord" in a copy of the Quran, local church leaders said.

Tamirat Woldegorgis, a member of the Full Gospel Church in his early 30s, was arrested in early August after the Muslim co-worker in the clothes-making business the two operated out of a rented home discovered Woldegorgis had inscribed "Jesus is Lord" on some cloth, area Christians said.

Woldegorgis returned from a break one morning to find that the inscribed words had been cut out of the piece of cloth, the sources said. He then had the words set in the machinery of their tailoring business for inscription on clothing material, only to find later that the inscribed plates were removed from the machinery as well, they said.

The Muslim associate, whose name has not been established, then went to a nearby mosque with the accusation that Woldegorgis had written "Jesus is Lord" in the Quran itself, sources said. Angry sheikhs at the mosque subsequently had Woldegorgis arrested for desecrating the book sacred to Islam, they said.

Other sources said, however, that Muslims accused Woldegorgis of writing "Jesus is Lord" on a piece of wood, on a minibus and then on the wall of a house. As he has not been brought to court, the exact charges against him are not yet known. Woldegorgis denies all accusations, and area Christians insisted he is innocent.

A church leader who requested anonymity told Compass that Christians in Moyale are concerned that Woldegorgis, a married father of two from Hagarmariam village, has not been granted a trial after two months in jail. He said that two days after Woldegorgis was arrested, two friends inquired about him at the Moyale police station; authorities responded by jailing them for two weeks.

"The Ethiopian constitution allows for religious tolerance," said the church leader, "but to date Woldegorgis has not been taken to court. He is still in a police cell, which is quite unusual for an Ethiopian national, and given constitutional provisions."

Jijiga, capital of Ethiopia's Somali Region, has the largest court in eastern Ethiopia, and Christians fear that Islamic principles govern it. 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.

"We fear that our brother might be taken to Islamic court in Jijiga for trial, which will further threaten his life," the church leader said. "Where is justice for our brother being in prison without been tried?"

Sources also said that authorities are offering to release Woldegorgis if he will convert to Islam. Woldegorgis is physically weak but strong in his faith, the church leader said, adding that he needs food and other material assistance, as well as an attorney.

Sources said Woldegorgis has been jailed in Zone Five of Ethiopia's Somali Region, a predominantly Somali area. Moyale, located on Ethiopia's border with Kenya, is divided between the predominantly Muslim Zone Five and Zone Four, which is populated mainly by ethnic Oromo, with each zone having distinct administrative and judiciary systems. Preaching non-Muslim faiths is not allowed in Zone Five, in spite of provisions for religious freedom in Ethiopia's constitution.

Hostility toward those spreading faiths different from Islam is a common occurrence in predominantly Muslim areas of Ethiopia and neighboring countries, they said. Christians are often subject to harassment and intimidation.

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 2009 International Religious Freedom Report. According to the 2007 census, 44 percent of Ethiopia's population affiliate with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 19 percent are evangelical and Pentecostal and 34 percent are Sunni Muslim.

Christians in Ethiopian town hit by unexpected attack

Orthodox church members strike two evangelical worship buildings, beat evangelist unconscious

By Simba Tian

Compass Direct (15.04.2010) / HRWF (20.04.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Evangelical Christians in an area of Ethiopia unaccustomed to anti-Christian hostility have come under attack from Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) members threatened by their existence, Christian leaders said.

In Olenkomi, about 65 kilometers (40 miles) west of the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, two church buildings were attacked by an EOC mob in Olenkomi town, Oromia Region, on Jan. 27 - leaving one evangelist unconscious and other Christians fearful of Orthodox hostility. Area Christians fear the assailants will not face justice due to the EOC's powerful presence and impending elections.

A Mekane Yesus Church building was destroyed in the assault, while a Brethren Church structure suffered damages.

Attacks against evangelicals in the area are rare, but recently Christians have come under immense pressure as they face isolation and verbal threats, church leaders said. Located in the West Shoa Zone of Oromia Region, Olenkomi is a small town where most people there and in surrounding areas belong to the EOC. All officials in government are EOC members, and evangelical Christians encounter difficulties obtaining land for church buildings, church leaders said.

The attack followed an accidental fire from liturgical candles that burned an EOC building. EOC members blamed evangelicals, and in the ensuing assault evangelist Abera Ongeremu was so badly beaten the mob left him for dead. Another three Christians also sustained minor injuries.

Ongeremu was visiting from Neqemite, 260 kilometers (161 miles) away. After the mob stoned the Brethren Church, they next targeted Mekane Yesus Church, where Ongeremu was staying in guest quarters. A member of the mob took a Bible from his guest room and told him to burn it.

"How can I burn the book that showed me life?" the shocked Ongeremu asked.

He said that he told the mob that they could do anything they wanted, but he was not going to burn the Holy Bible. The attackers tied his hands and legs together and threw him back into the room, sprinkling diesel on the walls and roof and locking him in before setting it on fire, he said.

"I thought it was my last," Ongeremu said. "I now understand nothing will happen to you without the will of God. That was not the day God allowed for me to die."

Some of the assailants argued that Ongeremu should not die by burning, but by beating. Two of them dragged him out of the room and continuously beat him, covering his face in blood. He sustained wounds on his skull and right arm.

"After repeated beatings I lost consciousness," he said. "I didn't know how and when they left me. I only recall they argued about how to kill me."

Premeditated?

Federal police were summoned from Ambo – the nearest town some 50 kilometers (31 miles) away – to disperse the mob, but too late to avert the injuries and damages after their rugged journey of nearly three hours.

Prior to the attacks, according to church leaders, there was no substantial build-up of tension between the two groups, though EOC priests had expressed anger about the expansion of evangelical churches and had questioned why teachers from evangelical backgrounds were prevalent in the high school in Olenkomi.

Most of the teachers at Olenkomi Secondary High School are evangelical Christians, according to church leaders, who said this circumstance was solely coincidental. Although teachers of evangelical faith are prevalent in the school, they are forbidden by law to promote their faith in class.

The EOC members had been constructing a building for a church in Olenkomi, but because of funding shortfalls they revised the plan and built a temporary structure. Evangelical church leaders said EOC priests had seized the land without formal process, but sources said the EOC's strong presence in the area kept evangelical church officials from protesting brazen construction efforts.

The EOC's small structure was being used for liturgical purposes.

"The shelter-like house has faced fire disaster in various incidents," said a church leader in Olenkomi. "The materials used to build it, and the curtains they hung on walls exposed the shelter to several fire incidents. The [candle and lantern] lights the priests used for liturgy were causing problems. We heard that a number of times the fire had lit curtains, and the priests stopped before it spread."

Such a fire broke out on the day of the attack, this time out-pacing the frantic efforts of the priests. The fire consumed curtains inside the house and spread to roofs and walls. To douse it the priests went to a nearby government-owned water tank operated by an evangelical woman. She granted them water, and the structure did not burn entirely.

When they later returned to wash, however, they put their hands inside the tank and sullied the public water source. When the operator objected, the EOC members spoke derogatorily of her as a "Pente" and began to spread the rumor that she was responsible for the burnt structure, church leaders said.

EOC members quickly formed into groups of various sizes, sources said, and rolled into town chanting, "This is the day to destroy Pentecostals and their churches!" They first went to the Brethren Church, located by the side of a highway that stretches through Olenkomi to western Ethiopia.

"When we first heard stones falling on the roof, we thought the wind was tearing up iron sheets," said one evangelist. "We also heard a loud noise from outside. It was around 12:30 p.m. I opened the main door to check what was happening. The whole compound was filled by men and women who carried stones and sticks. It was a very scary sight."

They were stoning the church building, forcing the praying believers to escape through a back door. The assailants continued breaking doors and windows, thinking worshippers were trapped inside.

Local police arrived, the evangelist said, but they failed to disperse the violent mob.

"Despite firing into the air, the officers didn't do anything serious to stop the mob," he said. "They later said it is beyond their capacity and would call Federal Police from Ambo town. The anti-riot police arrived two and half hours later, practically after the mob effectively carried out all the destruction."

Of the attack on Mekane Yesus Church, one church leader said the mob broke in and set fire on everything they found.

"They gathered benches, office chairs and tables, documents, musical instruments, public address system, choir uniforms and other materials and set them on fire," he said. "They also lit fire to the church building, which reduced it to ashes."

The mob was not finished. They proceeded to the high school, where they attacked Christian teachers as students rushed to defend them. Church leaders said the targeting of the school was evidence that the attack had been planned before with well-considered aims.

With Ethiopia scheduled to hold parliamentary elections on May 23, government officials don't want to upset voters by punishing those behind the attacks, church leaders said. It is likely that officials would pressure church leaders from both camps to settle for the sake of stability, but Christians fear that in doing so their complaints will be overlooked.

Some suspects have been identified, but church leaders don't expect they will be punished.

"It is like hitting a fire ball," said a church leader from Brethren Church. "When you hit the fire, it would round back to you. It can even burn you. You may also distribute the fire to new places."

In spite of the violence, evangelical Christians have engaged in "fervent witnessing ministry and prayer," he said.

"It awakens us to think, pray and unite," he said. "There is no good in persecution. But God turned it around for the good of us. The persecution was intended to destroy our commitment, but it rather built our faith."

As election day draws closer, said the leader, EOC priests could easily motivate followers to attack.

"That would be bad times for believers," he said. "Let's pray for people in Olenkomi to know the will of God and repent from evil from which they assume to serve God."

Ethiopian authorities concoct new charge against Christian

Holding convert from Islam without formal charges since May, police seek 'terrorism' evidence

By Simba Tian

Compass Direct (18.02.2010) / HRWF (19.02.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Prosecutors and police are trying to concoct a terrorism case against an Ethiopian convert from Islam who has been jailed since May without formal charges, Christian leaders said.

Bashir Musa Ahmed, a 39-year-old Ethiopian national, was arrested on May 23 when police found him in possession of eight Bibles in Jijiga, capital of Ethiopia's Somali Region Zone Five, a predominantly Muslim area in eastern Ethiopia. Zonal police arrested him after he was accused of providing Muslims with the Somali-language Bibles, sources said, though Ethiopia's constitution protects such activity.

A state official joined Christian leaders in stating that Islamist interests have kept Ahmed in jail in spite of the state's failure to find any legitimate charge against him. Initially the Christian was arrested for "malicious" distribution of a version of the Bible that is widely available in Ethiopia and is commonly used by Somali Christians inside and outside of the country.

Unable to mount a case rooted in Islamist accusations with no legal bases, authorities have turned toward the terrorism charge as a new tactic, Christian leaders said. Police have submitted the terrorism charge to prosecutors, prompting the prosecutors last month to ask police to find some evidence for the accusation, according to a church leader.

"Police have submitted their investigation results to the prosecutor's office accusing Bashir of terrorism," said the church leader. "We heard that the prosecutors asked police to solidify their accusations with evidences of Bashir's connections [to a terrorist group, and to specify] which terrorist group. Prosecutors seem to feel they need to have some evidence to charge him with terrorism."

Church leaders said they have received reports of authorities beating Bashir in jail.

"We repeatedly asked prison officials to take him to the hospital, and they are not willing to do so," said the church leader. "We are only allowed to talk to him for few minutes in the presence of onlookers. We take food for him, and we don't know whether it reaches him or not."

The church leader said law enforcement officials are receiving pressure from tribal and Islamic religious leaders.

"We have visited a number of officials in the region – the regional state president, the chairman of security forces and others, and they openly told us that they don't want to dismay the public by releasing Bashir," he said. "Some of the officials were saying to us that it is not right to translate the Bible into the regional state language and cultural context."

A Christian worker in Addis Ababa said a regional state official of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front who has close ties with authorities said that Ahmed was about to be released at one point, as prosecutors were unable to find any chargeable offense against him.

"I was almost sure he would be released within days," at least on bail, the official told the Christian worker, but "other issues came into play to influence the turn of events."

The official recalled participating in meetings in which regional state officials brought together all tribal and religious leaders in Somali state, he said.

"I heard the regional state leaders say that they are directly handling Ahmed's case to protect the religion and culture of Somalis," he said. "It was enough for me to realize that Ahmed's case involved a different agenda."

The Ethiopian constitution guarantees freedom of religion, the official told the Christian worker.

"This is not the communist regime's time," he said. "Everyone has the right to follow and practice the religion of his choice. Ahmed shouldn't be in jail for a single day. I suspect that the regional leaders are using Ahmed's case for other purposes."

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. An estimated 40 to 45 percent of Ethiopia's population belongs to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, evangelical and Pentecostal groups make up another 10 percent, and about 45 percent of the country's people are Sunni Muslim, according to the report.

Held without a court appearance for several months, Ahmed has been repeatedly denied bail as police continued to ask the court for more time to carry out investigations. At one hearing, sources said, a judge in Dire Dawa asked what crime Ahmed had committed; the prosecutor responded that Ahmed was trying to perpetuate a religious clash in the region.

Prosecutors have repeatedly opposed the defendant's pleas for bail with the argument that the case is a "very high sensitive matter with a potential to instigate religious instability."

"Ahmed's case is still pending and seems beyond legal proceedings," said the Christian worker. "We have tried every possible way, and all didn't work."

Powers and authorities

Bordering lawless Somalia, Ethiopia's Somali state sees sporadic instability in various areas, and sources said federal officials appear reluctant to take action that could diminish trust with tribal and religious leaders.

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.

The Christian worker said he has spoken to the speaker of the House of Federation in Addis Ababa, asking that he intervene; he has also brought the matter to the attention of the national security adviser to the prime minister. The adviser said he was unhappy with the handling of Ahmed's case and promised to come back with some answers within a week.

"This one too just disappeared," the Christian worker said. "It seems to me that we are only left with the exceptional intervention from God."

He said a ministry representative in the region has visited the police commander in Somali state to ask why Ahmed has been kept so long without trial. The commander was not responsive, he said.

"When he was challenged that it was Ahmed's constitutional right to get formal court proceedings, the commander abruptly responded that the constitution was second to his Islamic faith," the worker said. He added that state authorities, unlike in other areas, are acting according to their personal will rather than the law.

A church leader following the case in Jijiga said that even after many months in prison, Ahmed was fervently telling about faith in Christ to other inmates. "He is zealous to reach his tribe's men," said the church leader.

A conviction on terrorism charges would bring him a harsh sentence, he said.

"Bashir has an indefinite and uncertain future," he said. "Pray for him."
