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Moroccan convert serving 15 years for his faith

Compass Direct (17.09.2010) / HRWF (20.09.2010) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – Nearly five years into the prison sentence of the only Christian in Morocco serving time for his faith, Moroccan Christians and advocates question the harsh measures of the Muslim state toward a man who dared speak openly about Jesus.

By the end of December Jamaa Ait Bakrim, 46, will have been in prison for five years at Morocco's largest prison, Prison Centrale, in Kenitra. An outspoken Christian convert, Bakrim was sentenced to 15 years prison for "proselytizing" and destroying "the goods of others" in 2005 after burning two defunct utility poles located in front of his private business in a small town in south Morocco.

Advocates and Moroccan Christians said, however, that the severity of his sentence in relation to his misdemeanor shows that authorities were determined to put him behind bars because he persistently spoke about his faith.

"He became a Christian and didn't keep it to himself," said a Moroccan Christian and host for Al Hayat Television who goes only by his first name, Rachid, for security reasons. "He shared it with people around him. In Morocco, and this happened to me personally, if you become a Christian you may be persecuted by your family. If you keep it to yourself, no one will bother you. If you share it with anyone else and start speaking about it, that's another story."

Rachid fled Morocco in 2005 due to mounting pressure on him and his family. He is a wanted man in his country, but he said it is time for people to start speaking up on behalf of Bakrim, whom he said has "zeal" for his faith and speaks openly about it even in prison.

"Our Moroccan brothers and sisters suffer, and we just assume things will be OK and will somehow change later by themselves," said Rachid. "They will never change if we don't bring it to international attention."

Authorities in Agadir tried Bakrim for "destruction of the goods of others," which is punishable with up to 20 years in prison, and for proselytism under Article 220, which is punishable with six months to three years in prison.

"Jamaa is a manifestation of a very inconvenient truth for Moroccan authorities: there are Moroccan converts to Christianity," said Logan Maurer, a regional director at U.S.-based

advocacy group International Christian Concern (ICC). "The government wants to ignore this, suppress it, and when – as in Jamaa's case – the problem won't go away, they do whatever they can to silence it."

Proselytism in Morocco is generally defined as using means of seduction or exploiting weakness to undermine the faith of Muslims or to convert them to another religion.

Recently Morocco has used the law to punish any proclamation of non-Muslim faith, contradicting its pledge to allow freedom to manifest one's faith under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which it is a signatory. Article 18 of the covenant affirms the right to manifest one's faith in worship, observance, practice or teaching.

The covenant also states, however, that "freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others."

There are an estimated 1,000 Moroccan Christian converts in the country. They are not recognized by the government. About 99 percent of Morocco's population of more than 33 million is Muslim.

Between March and June authorities expelled 128 foreign Christians in an effort to purge the country of any foreign Christian influences. In April nearly 7,000 Muslim religious leaders backed the deportations by signing a document describing the work of Christians within Morocco as "moral rape" and "religious terrorism." The statement from the religious leaders came amid a nationwide mudslinging campaign geared to vilify Christians in Morocco for "proselytism" – widely perceived as bribing people to change their faith.

In the same time period, Moroccan authorities applied pressure on Moroccan converts to Christianity through interrogations, searches and arrests. Christians on the ground said that, although these have not continued, there is still a general sense that the government is increasingly intolerant of Christian activities.

"They are feeling very bad," said Rachid. "I spoke to several of them, and they say things are getting worse...They don't feel safe. They are under a lot of disappointment, and [they are] depressed because the government is putting all kinds of pressure on them."

From Europe to Prison

Bakrim, a Berber from southern Morocco, studied political science and law in Rabat. After completing his studies he traveled to Europe, where he became a Christian. Realizing that it would be difficult to live out his new-found faith in Morocco, in 1993 he applied for political asylum in the Netherlands, but immigration authorities refused him and expelled him when his visa expired.

In 1995 Bakrim was prosecuted for "proselytizing," and spent seven months in jail in the city of Goulemine. In April 1996 he was transferred to a mental hospital in Inezgane, where authorities ordered he undergo medical treatments. He was released in June. The psychiatric treatment caused side-effects in his behavior and made it difficult for him to control his hands and legs for a period of time, sources told Compass.

Two years later authorities put him in jail again for a year because he publicly displayed a cross, according to an article by Moroccan weekly *Le Journal Hebdo* published in January 2005.

"He has a zeal about his religion," said Rachid. "He never denied his faith through all these things, and he even preached the gospel in prison and the psychiatric place where they held him ... They tried to shut him [up], and they couldn't."

In 2001 Bakrim again attracted attention by painting crosses and writing Bible verses in public view at his place of business, which also served as his home, according to the French-language weekly. Between 2001 and 2005 he reportedly wrote to the municipality of Massa, asking officials to remove two wooden utility posts that were no longer in use, as they were blocking his business. When authorities didn't respond, Bakrim burned them.

During his defense at the Agadir court in southern Morocco, Bakrim did not deny his Christian faith and refuted accusations that he had approached his neighbors in an attempt to "undermine their Muslim faith."

The judge ruled that "the fact that Jamaa denies accusations of proselytism is inconsistent with his previous confession in his opening statement when he proclaimed he was the son of Christ, and that he wished that Moroccans would become Christians," according to Le Journal Hebdo.

Bakrim did not appeal the court sentence. Though there have been other cases of Christians imprisoned for their faith, none of their sentences has been as long as Bakrim's.

"They will just leave him in the prison so he dies spiritually and psychologically," said Rachid. "Fifteen years is too much for anything they say he did, and Jamaa knows that. The authorities know he's innocent. So probably they gave him this sentence so they can shut him [up] forever."

Rachid asked that Christians around the world continue to lobby and pray that their Moroccan brothers and sisters stand firm and gain their freedoms.

"The biggest need is to stand with the Moroccan church and do whatever it takes to ask for their freedom of religion," said Rachid.

Morocco continues to purge nation of foreign Christians

New wave of deportations raises concerns for foreigners married to Moroccans

Compass Direct (01.07.2010) / HRWF (05.07.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Moroccan authorities expelled eight more foreign Christians from the country last weekend, bringing the total of deported Christians since March to 128.

Two foreign women married to Moroccan Christians were included in this third wave of deportations since March, raising concerns that local authorities intend to harass the country's small but growing Protestant community.

"They are all in fear," a source told Compass, "because this happened to people who are married."

One of the women, a Lebanese national married to a Moroccan, was diagnosed with cancer last month and is the mother of a 6-year old girl whom she was forced to leave behind.

A Spanish national, Sara Domene, 31, was also deported on Monday (June 28), according to news sources. Domene was working as a language teacher in the Western Sahara, a territory under Moroccan sovereignty.

Authorities called the foreigners to police stations across Morocco on Friday (June 25) and told them they had 48 hours to leave the country on grounds of "threatening public order."

Other nationals who were forced to leave the country over the weekend came from France, Egypt, Lebanon, Switzerland, Nigeria and Spain.

A source explained that Moroccan authorities are essentially deporting Christians for "proselytism," which is illegal in Morocco, but in order to justify the deportations they have claimed that the foreigners pose a threat to the state.

In April nearly 7,000 Muslim religious leaders backed the deportations by signing a document describing the work of Christians within Morocco as "moral rape" and "religious terrorism." The statement from the religious leaders came amid a nationwide mudslinging campaign geared to vilify Christians in Morocco for "proselytism" – widely perceived as bribing people to change their faith.

There are an estimated 1,000 Moroccan Christian converts in the country. They are not recognized by the government. About 99 percent of Morocco's population of more than 33 million is Muslim.

Congressional hearings

On June 17, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission held a U.S. congressional hearing on the ongoing deportations of U.S. citizens and other foreigners from Morocco.

Morocco has expelled about 58 U.S. citizens in the last four months. On Thursday (June 24) authorities informed about 10 U.S. citizens that they had 48 hours to leave the country, but within 24 hours the deportation orders were rescinded.

In a statement after the June 17 hearing, Rep. Frank Wolf (R-Va.), who co-chairs the Lantos commission, said he would lobby for the U.S. government to withhold funds it has pledged to Morocco if he did not see improvements in the treatment of Christians there.

"I will continue to stay with this issue until a resolution has been reached," he said. "Should this matter remain unresolved, it is possible that I may offer amendments in the Appropriations committee and on the House floor to restrict U.S. foreign aid from going to Morocco."

In a letter addressed to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on June 17, Ambassador of Morocco to the United States Aziz Mekouar claimed that the deportations "solely and exclusively targeted proselytism activities, which are clearly and categorically forbidden by the laws of Morocco and the precepts of Islam."

The ambassador said the Moroccan Penal Code imposes fines and prison sentences for those who "use means of seduction in the aim of undermining a Muslim's faith or of converting him/her to another religion, either by exploiting his weaknesses or needs, or through the use, to this end, of health or educational establishments, as well as shelters or orphanages."

Moroccan authorities have failed to provide foreign Christians whom they expelled with documented proof or official charges of their alleged proselytism activities. In his letter,

the ambassador said the deportations were preferable to the "difficult ordeal" of incarceration and a trial as part of a criminal procedure against the Christians.

Wolf noted that among those who were deported or denied reentry were businessmen, educators and humanitarian and social workers, "many of whom had resided in Morocco for over a decade in full compliance with the law. Additionally, those deported were forced to leave the country within two hours of being questioned by authorities, leaving everything behind."

Christian foreigners who were able to obtain official deportation documents have appealed their cases in the Moroccan courts. The hearings for those cases started in May and are continuing.

Moroccan Christian serving 15 years for faith

Case to be included in congressional hearing

International Christian Concern (17.06.2010) / HRWF (23.06.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - ICC has learned that Jamaa Ait Bakrim is currently imprisoned for "proselytizing," a charge punishable under Moroccan law.

Jamaa Ait Bakrim, prisoner number 26574, is currently in Prison Centrale, located in Kenitra, Morocco. He has been there since 2005 when he was sentenced to 15 years for "proselytism" and "destruction of goods of others." "This second charge is a common legal tactic of creating a separate infraction to lengthen the sentence and shift attention from the actual issue of religion," said a Moroccan Christian whose name is withheld for security reasons.

The charge of proselytization is derived from Article 220 of Moroccan Criminal Law which makes it illegal to "shake the faith of a Muslim." "The charge of 'proselytization' is a specific concern because the wide range of applications that are used to suppress other religions," stated the Moroccan source. This is the same official charge that has led to the deportation of many foreigners from Morocco in the past three months.

In 1993 Jamaa returned to his Moroccan village after a trip to Europe where he converted to Christianity. In 1994 he spent seven months in the mental hospital of Inezgane for proselytizing. In 1996 he was condemned to one year, this time in jail, for putting up a Christian cross in public. In 2001 he was prosecuted again, leading to the current sentence he has been serving since 2005.

A congressional hearing convened by the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission (TLHRC) will take place today on the issue of Moroccan religious freedom and the recent deportation of foreigners.

ICC's Regional Manager, Logan Maurer, stated, "This wrongful imprisonment exposes the Moroccan government's duplicity when it comes to religious freedom. They talk one way to the West, but their own people experience a very different reality. Morocco must be brought to account—to date a country that we give \$650 million a year in aid money is has been able to hide their religious persecution. I look forward to today's hearing to bring this issue to light."

Second wave of deportations hits foreign Christians

Muslim hardliners pressure government; nationals fears they may be next victim of 'purging'

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct (21.05.2010) / HRWF (29.04.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – In a second wave of deportations from Morocco, officials of the majority-Muslim country have expelled 26 foreign Christians in the last 10 days without due process.

Following the expulsion of more than 40 foreign Christians in March, the deportations were apparently the result of Muslim hardliners pressuring the nation's royalty to show Islamic solidarity.

The latest deportations bring the number of Christians who have had to leave Morocco to about 105 since early March. Christians and expert observers are calling this a calculated effort to purge the historically moderate country, known for its progressive policies, of all Christian elements – both foreign and national.

"I don't see the end," said Salim Sefiane, a Moroccan living abroad. "I see this as a 'cleansing' of Christians out of Morocco, and then I see this turning against the Moroccan church, which is already underground, and then persecution of Moroccan Christians, which is already taking place in recent days."

At least two Moroccan Christians have been beaten in the last 10 days, sources told Compass, and police have brought other Moroccan Christians to police stations daily for psychologically "heavy" interrogations. Authorities are enquiring about the activities of foreign and local Christians.

Forcibly Ejected

Legal sources said that according to Moroccan law, foreigners who have lived in the country for more than 10 years cannot be deported unless they are accused of a crime. They have the right to appeal the deportation order within 48 hours.

With only hours' notice and forced escort to the country's exit ports, almost none of the deportees were able to appeal their deportations.

"Most of these [deportations] are happening over the weekends, when the courts are closed," Sefiane said. "Most of them are done in a way where they're bringing them in [to the police station], intimidating them, and manhandling them out of the country. Many of them are not even going back to say goodbye to their wives, or even to pack a bag."

With the exception of three foreigners, in none of the forced deportations did authorities produce an official deportation order, sources said. In many cases, Moroccan officials used embassies to notify foreigners that they were being deported. In most cases, foreigners were presented with a document in Arabic for them to sign that stated that they "understood" that they were being deported.

Compass learned of one case in which a foreigner was forced to the airport, and when he resisted he was forcibly drugged and sent to his native country.

"The expats in the country are very vulnerable, and the way it has happened has been against the laws of the country," said a European Christian who was deported last week after nearly a decade of running his business in Morocco. "When I tried to walk away from the situation, I was physically stopped."

The deported Christian said that authorities never informed any of the Christian foreigners of their rights, when in fact there are national laws protecting foreigners.

"Basically they are trying to con everyone into leaving the country," he said.

Deported foreigners have had to leave their families behind in Morocco, as well as their friends and communities. Many of the deportees were the male breadwinners of the family and have left their families behind as they try to decide their future.

"It's devastating, because we have invested years of our lives into our community, business community and charity sectors," said the European Christian. "People flooded to our house when they heard I was bundled into the back of a police car by the local authorities. It was like a death in the family – forcibly ejected from the country without being able to say goodbyes, just like that."

The deportees have included Christians from North America, Latin America, Europe, Africa, New Zealand and Korea.

"It's come out of left field," said the European. "No one really knows why this is happening."

Internal Pressure

A regional legal expert said on condition of anonymity that a small number of extremist Muslims have undertaken a media campaign to "get [Christians'] good works out of the public eye and demonize Christians," in order to expel them and turn the nation against local Christians – some of whom are third-generation followers of Jesus.

"There are too many eyes and ears to what they want to do to the native Christians," said the expert. "They're trying to get to them ...They want to shut down the native Moroccan Christians."

Deportation orders are coming from the Ministry of Interior, and speculation on the reason for the sudden spike in expulsions has centered on the arrival of a new, hard-line Muslim interior director in January.

Moroccan officials have cited "proselytism" as the reason for the deportations. Reuters news agency reported Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs Minister Ahmed Toufiq as saying "proselytism" and "activism of some foreigners" had "undermined public order."

On April 12 local media reported that 7,000 religious Muslim leaders signed a document describing the work of Christians within Morocco as "moral rape" and "religious terrorism." The statement from the religious leaders came amid a nationwide mudslinging campaign geared to vilify Christians in Morocco for "proselytism" – widely perceived as bribing people to change their faith.

Religious rights advocates point out that under Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the more than 100 foreigners who had lived in Morocco, some for decades, not only had the right to stay in the country but had contributed to the nation.

"They expelled people who helped build up the country, trained people, educated Moroccan children, cared for orphans and widows, increased the GDP and trade," said the regional legal expert. "These people they expelled weren't even proselytizing under their own law. There's an international standard, yet they changed the definition of the terminology and turned it into this horrible 'religious terrorism.'"

One of the country's most prestigious educational institutions, George Washington Academy in Casablanca, has come under fierce criticism from media and investigation by authorities.

"The biggest problem is the image the Ministry of Justice is pushing about who the Christian foreigners are," said another observer on condition of anonymity. "All the articles have been extreme exaggerations of the manipulative aspect of what foreigners were doing, and especially when it comes to minors."

Local Christians have reported to sources outside of Morocco that attitudes towards them, which used to be more tolerant, have also shifted as a result of the extremist-led campaign, and some are experiencing family and societal pressure and discrimination as well.

International Forces

While the deportations have perplexed the local Christian community, the regional legal expert said that in some ways this was calculated and inevitable.

He said that the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) had been putting pressure on countries across the Middle East and North Africa to remove their Christian elements. Iraq, with its decline in Christian population from a few million to a few hundred thousand over the last decade, is a case in point.

"Countries which have been more forward looking and spoken about rights, freedoms and equalities have been pressured to demonstrate their Muslim credentials, and the best way to do this is to sanitize [religious] minorities from the borders," he said.

Congressman Frank Wolf (R-Va.), co-chairman of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, has called congressional hearings on June 17 to examine the human rights situation in Morocco in light of the expulsions. On Wednesday (May 19) Wolf called on the U.S. government to suspend \$697.5 million in aid it has pledged to Morocco based on criteria that it is "ruling justly."

"We've been told the Christians are a threat to the national security, so they are using terrorism laws against peace-loving Christians," said the deported European Christian. "But it is massively backfiring."

The Christian described how the Moroccan friends of Christian foreigners have been asking why they are being deported for their faith.

"They are being impacted by the reality of Christ through this, and it's having more of an effect on the community than years and years of quietly demonstrating Christ peacefully and lawfully," he said. "By breaking their own laws, they have opened the lid on the reality of the life of Christ."

There are an estimated 1,000 Moroccan Christian converts. They are not recognized by the government. About 99 percent of Morocco's population of more than 33 million is Muslim.

Dark days for Christians in Morocco

A spate of deportations marks a tougher stance toward Christians in once-tolerant Morocco

By Olivier Guitta

GlobalPost (25.04.2010) / HRWF (29.04.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The days of Christians in Morocco may be numbered.

A wave of so-called "proselytizing," that has reportedly converted tens of thousands Muslims into Christians, has prompted authorities to clamp down on Christian residents.

Over the last several weeks, more than 50 Christians from the U.S., the Netherlands and South Korea have been deported by Moroccan authorities. Some long-time Christian residents were not allowed back in the country.

The most high-profile operation took place in an orphanage called the Village of Hope, when 16 foreign Christians running the center were told they had two hours to pack up and leave the country. Kids they cared for cried, not understanding why 'their parents' were being taken away.

The orphanage had been operating for 10 years without any problems. What changed? Authorities appeared to be reacting to claims made by an extremist imam, who accused the orphanage of not respecting adoption procedures.

In most deportation cases, authorities don't even give a reason, though it's usually clear that those being deported are suspected of proselytizing. In fact, the proselytizing charge applies only to non-Muslims.

Even though Morocco is a much more tolerant country than, say, Saudi Arabia in terms of freedom of religion, it nonetheless imprisons anyone trying to "shake the faith of Muslims" for up to three years.

The timing of this clampdown may prove to taint Morocco's image for some time to come, given that it took place during the first summit between the European Union and Morocco pertaining to a renewal of ties, and also while U.S. Ambassador to Morocco, Sam Kaplan, was preparing his annual human rights report. Unsurprisingly the report stated that the embassy was "disheartened and distressed" about the expulsions.

A similar, though smaller, clampdown took place in 2005. The Moroccan press warned of the "greatest danger": American evangelical missionaries allegedly going around the country, from major cities such as Casablanca, Rabat, Marrakech and Fez to remote areas in the mountains or the countryside, to convert Muslims.

Why is Morocco developing a harder stance toward Christians? King Mohamed VI is responding to the pressure of not only Islamists but also from other conservative parties.

Already in 2005, Abdelhamid Aouad, a nationalist member of parliament, raised the issue on the floor of parliament, asking the minister of Islamic affairs what the government was doing about the massive evangelization underway. Repeatedly the minister told him that there was nothing to worry about.

Aouad declared, without proof, that the evangelists' ultimate goal was to convert 10 percent of the Moroccan population by 2020. An Islamist center mentioned that 150,000 Moroccans had been converted by Christian missionaries. Both unfounded allegations are clearly being used as scare tactics to shape public opinion.

Hard statistics are tough to get, but there are allegedly between 150 to 800 missionaries and from 7,000 to 58,000 converts in Morocco. The discrepancy in numbers can be explained by the fact that missionaries and converts have had to go underground in order to stay protected.

The regime has devoted time and energy to fight off this supposed wave of conversion through for example a zero tolerance policy and the creation of a cell devoted to monitoring the phenomenon.

While the plight of foreign Christians is bad, the one of Moroccan Christians is even worse. The Moroccan constitution guarantees the free practice of all religions and King Mohamed VI was crystal clear when he stated that people of the three religions ? Islam, Judaism and Christianity ? can freely and safely express themselves in the kingdom.

But Moroccan Christians are banned from entering official churches and have to pray in hiding. They also have to be married and buried under Muslim law.

The weekly Moroccan magazine Telquel rightly pointed out: ?Do we have the right in a country that calls itself modern to reduce to silence thousands of Moroccans??

Morocco's tolerant image suffers. The regime's tough policy on Christians is petty politics ? and it plays right into the hands of Islamists who advocate an end to the semi-freedom of religion in place in Morocco. This turnaround is not worthy of the Moroccan kingdom.

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www.thecroissant.com/about.html

Source URL (retrieved on April 26, 2010 03:57):

<http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/worldview/100420/christians-morocco-persecution>

Morocco begins large-scale expulsion of foreign Christians

Ongoing purge launched nationwide to stop 'proselytization'

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct (12.03.2010) / HRWF (19.03.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Moroccan authorities deported more than 40 foreign Christian aid workers this week (week ending March 13) in an ongoing, nationwide crackdown that included the expulsion of foster parents caring for 33 Moroccan orphans.

Deportations of foreign Christians continued at press time, with Moroccan authorities expressing their intention to deport specifically U.S. nationals. Sources in Morocco told Compass that the government gave the U.S. Embassy in Rabat a list of 40 citizens to be deported.

The U.S. Embassy in Rabat could not comment on the existence of such a list, but spokesperson David Ranz confirmed that the Moroccan government plans to deport more U.S. citizens for alleged "proselytizing."

"We have been informed by the Moroccan government that it does intend to expel more American citizens," said embassy spokesperson David Ranz.

Citing Western diplomats and aid groups, Reuters reported that as many as 70 foreign aid workers had been deported since the beginning of the month, including U.S., Dutch, British and New Zealand citizens.

At the Village of Hope orphanage near Ain Leuh, 50 miles south of Fez, the government on Monday (March 8) expelled 16 staff workers, 10 foster parents and 13 natural-born dependents from the country. The orphanage arranges for orphaned children to live with a set of foster parents rather than in a traditional dormitory setting, according to its website.

Police first came to the orphanage Saturday afternoon (March 6), questioning children and looking for Bibles and evidence of Christian evangelism; by late Sunday night they had told all foster parents and staff that they had to leave on Monday.

New Zealand native Chris Broadbent, a worker at Village of Hope, told Compass that the separation of the foster families and the children under their care was traumatic. As much as they hoped to be re-united, he said, that did not seem likely – officials told them they could visit as tourists in the future, but in reality authorities do not allow re-entry for those who have been expelled.

“At this stage, as much as we want to see the parents get back with their kids, we understand that may be almost impossible,” Broadbent said. “We’re not searching for scalps here, we don’t want to harm Morocco or anything like that, but we want to see the parents re-united with their children.”

Broadbent emphasized that government accusations that they had been proselytizing were unfounded, and that all staff had signed and adhered to a non-proselytizing policy.

“We were a legal institution,” he said. “Right from the start they knew that it was an organization founded by Christians and run by a mixture of Christians and Muslim people working together.”

Authorities told orphanage officials that they were being deported due to proselytizing but gave no evidence or explanation of who, when, where or how that was supposed to have occurred, according to a Village of Hope statement.

The orphanage had been operating for 10 years. Moroccan authorities had never before raised any charges about the care of the children, according to Village of Hope’s website.

In the village of Azrou, about 100 miles east of Rabat, another orphanage called Children’s Haven has been under investigation this week. Although it was still operating at press time, sources said its 20 staff members were prepared for a fate similar to that of Village of Hope, 30 minutes south.

“This action against the Village of Hope was part of a nationwide crackdown against Christians living in Morocco,” read a statement on Village of Hope’s website.

Some Christians in Morocco attribute the change in the country, generally known for its tolerance towards religious minorities, to the appointments of Mohammed Naciri as Minister of Justice and Taieb Cherkaoui as Minister of Interior in January.

Communications Minister Khalid Naciri said the government would be “severe with all those who play with religious values,” reported Agence France-Presse (AFP).

Local Christians next?

A Moroccan pastor, his wife and a relative were arrested on Wednesday [March 10] and released on the next day, raising fears among local Christians that the wave of intolerance may spread to the country’s small but growing church of nearly 1,000 believers.

An expert on religious freedom in the Middle East who requested anonymity said that attacks on the church are inevitable even in a Western-looking, modern country like Morocco, as the church grows and becomes more visible.

"Because conversion is a taboo, if the government looks like it is doing nothing in regard to all the foreign missionaries that are coming and 'corrupting' the country and its 'national soul,' it gives credit to Islamists who could challenge the 'Islam-ness' of the Royal Family and the government, and that's just what Morocco can't afford," said the expert.

The clampdown on foreign workers could signal government malaise toward the growing church.

"The more they grow, the more visible they become, the more they'll attract this reaction," said the expert. "And that's why they've been so quiet with house groups. It's just a matter of time."

Communications Minister Naciri reportedly denied the new, tougher line against non-Muslims was a step backward in terms of religious freedom in Morocco.

"Morocco has always been and remains a land of openness and tolerance," he told AFP. "The rare cases of expulsion have nothing to do with the practice of Christianity but with acts of proselytism."

The children have reportedly been placed in a care home.

Contradictory documents

As a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Morocco's accusations of "proselytization" by foreign aid workers apparently contradict its pledge to allow freedom to manifest one's faith. Article 18 of the covenant affirms the right to manifest one's faith in worship, observance, practice or teaching.

The covenant also states, however, that "freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others."

Previously the North African country had a history of religious tolerance. Morocco's constitution provides for freedom to practice one's religion, contradicting Article 220 of the Moroccan Penal Code, which criminalizes any attempt to induce a Muslim to convert to another religion.

In its 2009 international religious freedom report, the U.S. Department of State noted that on April 2, 2009, a Moroccan government spokesman asserted that freedom of religion does not include freedom to choose one's faith.

"The fight against Christian proselytizing in accordance with law cannot be considered among human rights abuses," the Moroccan government spokesman said, "for it is an action aimed at preventing attempts to undermine the country's immutable religious values. The freedom of belief does not mean conversion to another religion."

The crackdown this month appears unprecedented, with only smaller groups previously deported. In March 2009, Moroccan authorities expelled five foreign female Christians for trying to "proselytize" although sources said they were foreign visitors merely attending a Bible study with fellow Christians. In November 2009, police raided a Christian meeting in northern Morocco and expelled five foreigners.

Last month a large, military-led team of Moroccan authorities raided a Bible study in a small city southeast of Marrakech, arresting 18 Moroccans and deporting a U.S. citizen.

In a message yesterday, March 11, to U.S. citizens registered with the embassy, U.S. Ambassador Samuel Kaplan reportedly expressed concern about how the authorities conducted the deportations. Foreign Christians were told their residence permits were cancelled and that they had to leave the country immediately; they had no rights to appeal or challenge the decision.

"We were disheartened and distressed to learn of the recent expulsion by the Moroccan government of a number of foreigners, including numerous Americans, who had been legally residing in Morocco," Kaplan said in a statement. "Although we expect all American citizens to respect Moroccan law, we hope to see significant improvements in the application of due process in this sort of case."

Background information about Morocco

The Kingdom of Morocco is the most westerly of the North African countries known as the Maghreb. Strategically situated with both Atlantic and Mediterranean coastlines, but with a rugged mountainous interior, it stayed independent for centuries while developing a rich culture blended from Arab, Berber, European and African influences.

Overview

Morocco was a French protectorate from 1912 to 1956, when Sultan Mohammed became king. He was succeeded in 1961 by his son, Hassan II, who ruled for 38 years. He played a prominent role in the search for peace in the Middle East, given the large number of Israelis of Moroccan origin, but was criticised for suppressing domestic opposition.

A truth commission set up to investigate human rights violations during Hassan's reign has confirmed nearly 10,000 cases, ranging from death in detention to forced exile.

After his death in 1999 Hassan was succeeded by his son, who became King Mohammed VI and was seen as a moderniser. There has been some economic and social liberalisation, but the monarch has retained sweeping powers.

Morocco is bidding for membership of the European Union, its main trade partner, but there appears to be little enthusiasm for this within the bloc.

To the south, the status of Western Sahara remains unresolved. Morocco annexed the territory in 1975 and a guerrilla war with Algerian-backed pro-independence forces ended in 1991. UN efforts have failed to break the political deadlock.

To the north, a dispute with Spain in 2002 over the tiny island of Perejil revived the issue of the sovereignty of Melilla and Ceuta. The small enclaves on the Mediterranean coast are surrounded by Morocco and have been administered by Madrid for centuries.

Morocco has been given the status of non-Nato ally by Washington, which has praised its support for the US-led war on terror. After deadly suicide bombings in Casablanca in 2003, Morocco launched a crackdown on suspected Islamic militants.

Facts

Full name: The Kingdom of Morocco
Population: 32 million (UN, 2009)
Capital: Rabat
Largest city: Casablanca
Area: 710,850 sq km (274,461 sq miles) (including W Sahara)
Major languages: Arabic (official), Berber, French, Spanish
Major religion: Islam
Life expectancy: 69 years (men), 73 years (women) (UN)
Monetary unit: Dirham = 100 centimes
Main exports: Minerals, seafood products, citrus fruit
GNI per capita: US \$2,580 (World Bank, 2008)

Leaders

King: King Mohammed VI

Groomed for "kingship", as his late father King Hassan II referred to his upbringing, Mohammed VI became monarch in 1999.

He initiated political and economic changes and an investigation into human rights abuses during his father's rule.

The king says the fight against poverty is a priority, earning him the name "guardian of the poor". Economic liberalisation has attracted foreign investment and officials point to better basic services in shanty towns and rural areas. But some non-government groups say little has changed, with poverty still widespread and unemployment remaining high.

A key reform has been the Mudawana, a law which grants more rights to women. The king has said it is in line with Koranic principles, but religious conservatives have opposed it.

Bomb attacks in Casablanca in 2003 prompted the enactment of new anti-terrorism laws and a reinvigorated campaign against extremists. But some rights groups say the measures have eroded human rights.

King Mohammed married computer engineer Salma Bennani in 2002. They have a son, Crown Prince Moulay Hassan, born in 2003, and a daughter, Princess Lalla Khadija, born in 2007.

Under the constitution, the king can dissolve parliament and dismiss or appoint the prime minister.

Prime minister: Abbas El Fassi

Mr El Fassi, leader of the conservative Istiqlal Party, took office in September 2007 after his party emerged as the largest in parliamentary elections.

Born in 1940, Mr El Fassi has served as a minister and diplomat since 1977, including a stint as ambassador to France in 1990-1994. He was minister of state in the coalition government of his predecessor, Driss Jettou, from 2002-2007.

His government also includes the Socialist Union of Popular Forces, the National Rally of Independents, and the Party of Progress and Socialism.

Moroccan authorities raid Bible study, arrest Christians

Order to detain 18 nationals, deport U.S. citizen apparently came from highest levels

By Pablo Fredrick

Compass Direct (09.02.2010) / HRWF (10.02.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - A large, military-led team of Moroccan authorities raided a Bible study in a small city southeast of Marrakech last week, arresting 18 Moroccans and deporting a U.S. citizen, area Christian leaders said.

Approximately 60 officers from the Moroccan security services on Thursday afternoon (Feb. 4) raided the home of a Christian in Amizmiz, a picturesque city of 10,000 mainly Berber people 56 kilometers (35 miles) southeast of Marrakech. A church Bible study was in progress at the home with visitors from western and southern Morocco, the leaders said.

Five of the 18 people held for 14 hours were small children, two of them infants no more than 6 months old. The other small children ranged from 20 months to 4 years old, and also detained was the visiting 16-year-old nephew of one of the participants.

The Christian leaders said authorities interrogated participants in the Bible study for 14 hours. The authorities filmed the interrogations with digital video cameras and cell phones.

The leader of the Christian group, who requested anonymity for security reasons, said the raiding party was unusually large. It included an accompaniment of 15 vehicles led by a colonel and two captains.

"It's the first time in our current Moroccan church history that the Moroccan government used this size of a legion to attack a small Christian meeting," he said. "All the time they kept repeating that this was ordered personally by the new Moroccan Justice Minister [Mohamed Naciri] and by the highest level General of the Gendarmerie [Housni Benslimane]."

Quoting a statement by the Interior Ministry, the state-run Maghreb Arabe Presse news agency reported that a "foreign missionary" had been arrested for trying to "spread evangelist creed in the Kingdom and locate new Moroccan nationals for recruitment."

The statement added that the raid took place "following information on the organization of a secret meeting to initiate people into Christianity, which would shake Muslims' faith and undermine the Kingdom's religious values."

The U.S. citizen, whose name has not been released, was deported immediately after interrogation. The Christian leaders said the visiting Moroccans were sent back to their homes in western and southern Morocco.

Authorities seized Bibles, books, two laptops, a digital camera and one cell phone, they said.

"I don't think this number of Moroccan government forces was ever used even against Muslim fundamentalists," the leader of the Christian group said.

Conflicting codes

Overall, the North African country has a history of religious tolerance. Morocco's constitution provides for freedom to practice one's religion, but Article 220 of the Moroccan Penal Code criminalizes any attempt to induce a Muslim to convert to another religion.

In its 2009 international religious freedom report, the U.S. Department of State noted that on April 2, 2009, a Moroccan government spokesman asserted that freedom of religion does not include freedom to choose one's faith.

"The fight against Christian proselytizing in accordance with law cannot be considered among human rights abuses," the Moroccan government spokesman said, "for it is an action aimed at preventing attempts to undermine the country's immutable religious values. The freedom of belief does not mean conversion to another religion."

Morocco is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 18 of the covenant affirms the right to manifest one's faith in worship, observance, practice or teaching.

The covenant also states, however, that "freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others."

In early December last year Moroccan police expelled five Christian foreigners for "attending a forbidden meeting," according to an unnamed government official. The five men were involved in a training seminar for 17 Christians in northern Morocco.

"We were highly surprised that Morocco dared to arrest and expel us," said one of the deported Christians, noting that only Christians were present at the meetings. "The police told us that we were holding a forbidden meeting, but we are friends just coming together for fellowship and for teaching each other. Is that forbidden in Morocco?"

The deportations were a serious violation of religious rights, the Christian said.

"The police came with 35 agents – 12 of them invaded the building, and the rest of the police surrounded the premises just to arrest 17 friends coming together for fellowship," he said. "We were held in custody for one day and night, and we were interrogated for many hours, until 4:30 the next morning."

On March 29, 2009, the Moroccan government announced that it had expelled five female Christians for attempting to "proselytize," although sources said they were foreign visitors merely attending a Bible study with fellow Christians. The accused women were five of 23 tourists, expatriates and Moroccans arrested in Casablanca on March 28 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 gathered merely for a Bible study, which he said falls within Morocco's constitutional right of freedom to express one's faith.

The authorities interrogated 12 others, 11 of them Moroccan citizens, for participating in the women's Bible study in the apartment of a local Christian leader in Casablanca. They released them early the following morning, returning them home in unmarked police cars, according to the state department report.

"The authorities reportedly pressured the women to return to Islam, mocked their Christian faith, questioned why they left Islam to become Christians, and asked if there were other Christians in their families," the report states.

A Christian who works in the country told Compass that Moroccan Christians do not see themselves as contradicting national values.

"Moroccan Christians are proud to be Moroccan and desire the freedom to be legally recognized by the government," he said.
