

Table of Contents

- ***Not a single Christian church left in Afghanistan, says State Department***
 - ***Smuggled letter reveals Afghan Christian's fear of execution***
 - ***Execution trial of Afghan convert is illegal***
 - ***One-legged Afghan Red Cross worker set to be hanged after converting to Christianity***
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Not a single Christian church left in Afghanistan, says State Department

CNSNews.com (11.10.2011) / (13.10.2011) – www.hrwf.net– There is not a single, public Christian church left in Afghanistan, according to the U.S. State Department.

This reflects the state of religious freedom in that country ten years after the United States first invaded it and overthrew its Islamist Taliban regime.

In the intervening decade, U.S. taxpayers have spent \$440 billion to support Afghanistan's new government and more than 1,700 U.S. military personnel have died serving in that country.

The last public Christian church in Afghanistan was razed in March 2010, according to the State Department's latest International Religious Freedom Report. The report, which was released last month and covers the period of July 1, 2010 through December 31, 2010, also states that "there were no Christian schools in the country."

"There is no longer a public Christian church; the courts have not upheld the church's claim to its 99-year lease, and the landowner destroyed the building in March [2010]," reads the State Department report on religious freedom. "[Private] chapels and churches for the international community of various faiths are located on several military bases, PRTs [Provincial Reconstruction Teams], and at the Italian embassy. Some citizens who converted to Christianity as refugees have returned."

In recent times, freedom of religion has declined in Afghanistan, according to the State Department.

"The government's level of respect for religious freedom in law and in practice declined during the reporting period, particularly for Christian groups and individuals," reads the State Department report.

"Negative societal opinions and suspicion of Christian activities led to targeting of Christian groups and individuals, including Muslim converts to Christianity," said the report. "The lack of government responsiveness and protection for these groups and individuals contributed to the deterioration of religious freedom."

Most Christians in the country refuse to "state their beliefs or gather openly to worship," said the State Department.

More than 1,700 U.S. military personnel have died serving in the decade-old Afghanistan war, according to CNSNews.com's database of all U.S. casualties in Afghanistan. A September audit released jointly by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction and the State Department's Office of Inspector General, found that the

U.S. government will spend at least \$1.7 billion to support the civilian effort from 2009-2011.

According to that report, the \$1.7 billion excludes additional security costs, which the report says the State Department priced at about \$491 million.

A March 2011 report by the Congressional Research Service showed that overall the United States has spent more than \$440 billion in the Afghanistan war. Christian aid from the international community has also gone to aid the Afghan government.

Nevertheless, according to the State Department, the lack of non-Muslim religious centers in Afghanistan can be blamed in part on a "strapped government budget," which is primarily fueled by the U.S. aid.

"There were no explicit restrictions for religious minority groups to establish places of worship and training of clergy to serve their communities," says the report, "however, very few public places of worship exist for minorities due to a strapped government budget."

The report acknowledged that Afghanistan's post-Taliban constitution, which was ratified with the help of U.S. mediation in 2004, can be contradictory when it comes to the free exercise of religion.

While the new constitution states that Islam is the "religion of the state" and that "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam," it also proclaims that "followers of other religions are free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of the law."

However, "the right to change one's religion was not respected either in law or in practice," according to the State Department.

"Muslims who converted away from Islam risked losing their marriages, rejection from their families and villages, and loss of jobs," according to the report. "Legal aid for imprisoned converts away from Islam remains difficult due to the personal objection of Afghan lawyers to defend apostates."

The report does note that "in recent years neither the national nor local authorities have imposed criminal penalties on converts from Islam." The report says that "conversion from Islam is considered apostasy and is punishable by death under some interpretations of Islamic rule in the country."

Also, in recent years, the death punishment for blasphemy "has not been carried out," according to the State Department.

According to the State Department report, the United States continues to promote religious freedom in Afghanistan--even though the country no longer has even one Christian church.

"The U.S. government regularly discusses religious freedom with government officials as part of its overall policy to promote human rights," according to the report.

According to the State Department report, more than 99 percent of the population, estimated between 24 and 33 million people, is either Sunni (80 percent) or Shia (19 percent) Muslim. Non-Muslim religious groups, including the estimated 500 to 8,000 strong Christian community in the country, make up less than 1 percent of the population. Other non-Muslim groups in the country are Sikhs, Bahais, and Hindus.

Smuggled letter reveals Afghan Christian's fear of execution

Two Christians remain in prison despite months of U.S. diplomacy

International Christian Concern (22.02.2011) / HRWF (25.02.2011) – www.hrwf.net– International Christian Concern (ICC) has learned that two Afghan Christians who were arrested for their conversion to Christianity remain behind bars despite diplomatic efforts by the United States to secure their release. In a letter smuggled out of Qasre Shahi prison in Mazar-e-Sharif, one Christian wrote that he may receive the death penalty for apostasy.

In a letter dated February 17, Shoaib Assadullah described his imprisonment and expressed little hope that he would be released soon. "Not only has my freedom been taken from me, but I am undergoing severe psychological pressure," Assadullah *said*. "Several times I have been attacked physically and threatened with death by fellow prisoners, especially Taliban and anti-government prisoners who are in jail. These assaults on my human dignity have affected me negatively, close to the point of death."

Assadullah was arrested on October 21 in Mazar-e-Sharif for giving a Bible to a man who later reported him to local authorities. At a court hearing on December 28, Assadullah was given one week to recant Christianity and return to Islam or else receive the death penalty. Due to immediate foreign pressure by the U.S., Italy and other governments, Afghanistan's Attorney General intervened by suspending the trial. However, Assadullah believes that he will be summoned to court again soon.

"My case is supposed to be sent to the court shortly because the prosecutor has the right to hold a case only for 30 days," Assadullah *wrote*. "The court's decision is most definitely going to be the death penalty for me, because the prosecutor has accused me under the Clause 139 of the criminal code which says, 'If the crime is not cited in the criminal code, then the case has to be referred to Islamic Sharia law.'"

Assadullah joined Said Musa as the second known imprisoned Christian in Afghanistan who faces charges for apostasy. Musa was arrested in May after a local television network broadcast footage of Afghans being baptized and participating in prayer gatherings. The broadcast led to a nationwide crackdown against Muslim converts to Christianity.

Aidan Clay, ICC Regional Manager for the Middle East, said, "The U.S. has sacrificed blood and treasure to ensure that human rights are upheld in Afghanistan. Yet, months of backdoor diplomacy engaging Afghanistan's government have resulted in little more than suspending Shoaib Assadullah's trial and transferring Said Musa to a safer prison. This means one of two things: the U.S. has minimal leverage over Karzai's administration or the U.S. is protecting Karzai from the repercussions he may face from extremists groups, like the Taliban, if he were to willingly let an apostate free. More than likely, the latter is true and politics have taken precedent over the American ideals of liberty while two Afghans rot in prison for exercising their right to choose their own faith. We urge the Obama administration to strengthen its efforts and not back down until Shoaib Assadullah and Said Musa are released."

Execution trial of Afghan convert is illegal

World Evangelical Alliance (12.02.2011) / HRWF (14.02.2011) – www.hrwf.net - The trial of an Afghan man, Said Musa, who may face execution for converting to Christianity, violates the Constitution of Afghanistan approved by consensus in 2004 and must be stopped.

Forty-five year-old Musa was arrested after a television station in the capital city of Kabul broadcast images that allegedly showed Westerner Christians baptizing Afghans. Since the May 2010 telecast, Musa has remained in the infamous Kabul Detention Center and suffered sexual assault and torture with apparently no access to a lawyer to defend him.

"The arrest of Musa in the first place and the subsequent demands for death for apostasy violate at least three provisions of the Constitution of Afghanistan, leave aside the illegality of the inhuman treatment meted out to him in the prison," said WEA-RLC Executive Director Godfrey Yogarajah.

Article 130 of the Constitution states that courts can rely on the Sharia law as per the Hanafi jurisprudence only within the limits of the Constitution and only if a 'pending' case does not relate to any provisions in the Constitution or any other law, Yogarajah said.

A case can be pending only if it is first registered under a law, but apostasy is not a crime recognized in the Constitution or any other statutory law, Yogarajah pointed out. "Article 27 of the Constitution says that no person shall be pursued, arrested or detained for an act that is not considered a crime. So under what statutory law was Musa arrested?" he asked.

"Furthermore, Article 7 of the Constitution clearly marks Afghanistan's obligation to the international covenants the country is signatory to." One of the conventions Afghanistan has signed (in 1983) without any reservation is the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

The three clauses under Article 18 of the ICCPR state: (1) Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching. (2) No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice. (3) 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.

WEA-RLC is aware that Article 3 of the Constitution of Afghanistan says that no law can be contrary to "the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam," Yogarajah added. "But this is a contradiction the earlier constitutions of the country had since 1923. But after the inclusion of Article 7, which carries a pledge to abide by international conventions, in the 2004 Constitution, the interpretation of Article 3 needs to be reformulated in light of the glaring contradiction."

The addition of the provision of Article 7 in the 2004 Constitution was surely not without a purpose, and nor was it an oversight. It was indisputably added to increase the nation's commitment and compliance to international standards of civil rights.

"Calls for the death of an alleged apostate by extremist elements are understandable, but when the administration seeks death penalty for a convert by the misuse of the vagueness in laws, it raises serious concerns," said Yogarajah.

It is shocking that even nine years after the fall of the Taliban, little change is visible in the crucial areas of rule of law and civil liberties.

Said Musa, whose wife and six children had to flee to Pakistan after his arrest, is the first trial for apostasy that has reached near execution since the Taliban's fall. But it is hoped and prayed that the administration of Afghanistan will do nothing that will denote an utter failure of the new regime as well as the international community.

"Repression can never lead to peace in the long-run, if the government thinks reforms can lead to a backlash by extremists," said Yogarajah.

One-legged Afghan Red Cross worker set to be hanged after converting to Christianity

Daily Mail (07.02.2011) / HRWF (08.02.2011) - www.hrwf.net - An Afghan physiotherapist will be executed within three days for converting to Christianity.

Said Musa, 45, has been held for eight months in a Kabul prison where he claims he has been tortured and sexually abused by inmates and guards.

Mr Musa, who lost his left leg in a landmine explosion in the 1990s, has worked for the Red Cross for 15 years and helps to treat fellow amputees.

He was arrested in May last year as he attempted to seek asylum at the German embassy following a crackdown on Christians within Afghanistan.

He claims he was visited by a judge who told him he would be hanged within days unless he converted back to Islam.

But he remains defiant and said he would be willing to die for his faith.

He told the Sunday Times: 'My body is theirs to do what they want with.'

'Only God can decide if my spirit goes to hell.'

Defence lawyers have refused to represent him, while others have dropped the case after receiving death threats.

Mr Musa was arrested after a TV station showed western men baptising Afghans during secret ceremonies.
