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Church faces increasing hostility in Sudan

Constructing worship buildings more difficult since secession of South Sudan

Compass Direct News (24/10/2011) / HRWF (03.11.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Emboldened by government calls for a Sudan based on Islamic law since the secession of South Sudan, Muslims long opposed to a church near Khartoum have attacked Christians trying to finish constructing their building, sources said.

The Sudanese Church of Christ (SCOC) congregation in Omdurman West, across the Nile River from Khartoum, has continued to meet for Sunday worship in a building without a roof in spite of opposition from area Muslims and local authorities, the sources told Compass. Claiming that Christianity was no longer an accepted religion in the country, Muslims in the Hay al Sawra, Block 29 area of Omdurman West on Aug. 5 attacked SCOC members who were constructing the church building, the sources said.

"We do not want any presence of churches in our area," shouted members of the mob as they threw stones at the Christians, the sources said.

Muslims in the north, where an estimated 1 million Christians still live following the secession of South Sudan on July 9, fear the potential influence of the church, they said.

"They want to reduce or restrict the number of churches, so that they can put more pressure on believers," said a church leader on condition of anonymity.

The SCOC has been trying to erect a church building on the site since it obtained the land in 1997, but both government officials and area Muslim residents have used delay tactics to prevent it, according to a Christian who lives in the area. The SCOC in that area of Omdurman is still trying to get permission from the Islamic government in Khartoum to construct the new church building, Christian sources in Khartoum said.

Muslims and local "popular committees" – responsible for issuing residence certificates necessary for obtaining citizenship or an ID card, with authority to strike down proposals for erecting church buildings – assert that no church is necessary because there are no Christians there. But there are many Christians living in the area, sources said.

The government-appointed members of the popular committees tend to consist of radical Muslims who monitor Christian activities in neighborhoods so they can report them to security authorities, Christian sources told Compass. Previously, area Christians were upset to learn that the popular committees had divided another piece of land they hoped to obtain into two lots – one designated for a mosque, and the other for a Muslim school, sources said.

“We have already raised our objection over the way we are being treated in regards to obtaining permission to build this church,” said a church leader who wished to remain unnamed.

The church had filed a complaint with the Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowments, which last month informed the SCOC that officials will investigate the matter, though they gave no time frame.

Meantime, the congregation finds that rain or whirling dust makes worship difficult, members said.

“I think we have much experience in how difficult it is to obtain permission for new church buildings in this country,” said a Christian leader who requested anonymity.

All religious groups must obtain permits from the Ministry of Guidance and Social Endowments, the state ministry of construction and planning and the local planning office before constructing new houses of worship, according to the U.S. Department of State’s 2010 International Religious Freedom Report.

Earlier this month, Sudan President Omar al-Bashir again asserted that the government has decided that Sudan will have a strictly Islamic identity. Al-Bashir, wanted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity in Darfur, made the statement to leaders of his party in Khartoum on Oct. 12.

Last December, one month before South Sudan’s vote for independence, Al-Bashir declared that if the south seceded as expected, Sudan would amend its constitution to make sharia (Islamic law) the only source of law and Arabic the official language.

Officials in Sudan threaten to raze three church buildings

Christian leaders say authorities are gathering information on churches, activities

Special to Compass Direct News

Compass Direct News (12.10.2011) / HRWF (13.10.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – Local authorities have threatened to demolish three church buildings in Omdurman as part of a long-standing bid to rid Sudan of Christianity, Christian sources told Compass.

Officials from the Ministry of Physical Planning and Public Utilities-Khartoum State appeared at the three church sites in Omdurman, on the Nile River opposite Khartoum, the afternoon of Sept. 11, threatening to demolish the structures if the churches continued to conduct worship services, church leaders said.

Church leaders from the three churches in the Madinat al Fath area of Omdurman – the Sudanese Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church of Sudan and the Roman Catholic Church – said they were surprised to see government officials come to their church

premises and accuse them of operating churches on government land without permission. The church leaders told Compass the buildings were not located on government land and required no permission.

They said that, starting at 2 p.m. the officials asked leaders of the Sudanese Church of Christ who had given them permission to build on government land, and then proceeded to the other two churches. The officials marked the three church buildings for demolition with red crosses, saying, "We are going to demolish these churches," the church leaders said.

Jaafer al Sudani, manager of Church Affairs in the Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowment, told Compass that officials there had no knowledge of church buildings to be demolished. The state planning officials insist that the churches are operating on government land.

Citing a growing tide of hostility toward Christians, members of the threatened churches said they were concerned about their future.

"These are clearly evil plans directed against churches and Christians in this country," said Kornules Yousif, an area Christian leader.

"This is serious," said another church member who asked to remain unnamed. "We do not want them to demolish our churches."

Local Muslims complain of the Christian presence in the area, Yousif said.

"Muslims say churches are not supposed to be given permission to operate because the number of Muslims is greater than that of Christians," he said.

Area Christians told Compass they take seriously such statements by Muslims as they reveal hostile motives by both the Islamic government and Muslim communities.

"These people can do everything possible to clear this country of Christianity," said a member of one of the threatened churches.

At the same time, area Christians said they believe the government is quietly carrying out surveys on Christians and church programs as part of a broader effort to make Islam the official state religion; officials from the Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowment have called church leaders, asking them to reveal information about their church members and activities of the Churches, they said.

"This is purely for intelligence purposes, so that they can put more restrictions on churches and Christians," said the Rev. Yousif El-Denger Kodi, general secretary of the Sudanese Lutheran Church. "We as church leaders are aware of their plans, but we pray for God to rescue us from their evil plans."

Islam is favored in law and policy in Sudan, according to the U.S. Department of State's 2010 International Religious Freedom Report. While sharia (Islamic law) is only "a source of legislation" according to the Interim National Constitution, there is a movement afoot to make Islam the official state religion following the secession of largely non-Muslim southern Sudan on July 9.

"Muslims are not happy to see churches in their areas, because they believe in Islam and fear the influence of the church, and that is why they hate to see churches," a church leader who requested anonymity told Compass.

Killings in S. Kordofan cast shadow over Christians in Sudan

Targeting of civilians in embattled state darkens outlook of converts in north

Special to Compass Direct News

Compass Direct News (29.09.2011) / HRWF (03.10.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Failure by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and allied Islamic militia to distinguish between combatants and civilians in territorial battles in South Kordofan state is due in part to a desire to rid the area of Christianity, local Christians say.

A Christian in the Leri East area of Kadugli who escaped SAF Intelligence agents 18 days after his June 20 arrest from his home said he saw six other Christian detainees taken away, one by one, to be executed over the course of two weeks.

"They were insulting us, saying that this land is an Islamic land and that we were not allowed to be in this land," he told Compass. "I saw them take my fellow Christians brothers and shoot them in the forest near the place where we were detained."

While the SAF and its paramilitary allies have targeted members and supporters of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement forces, the Christian, who requested anonymity as he is still in hiding, said he was detained simply because he was a Christian. A convert from Islam 10 years ago, he said he was scheduled to be executed the day he escaped.

"I was already dead, so I did not fear being shot dead - I was not worried about my safety any more; after all, I was under their mercy as they thought, but God was in control," he said.

A former aid worker with a Christian humanitarian agency, he said he was praying throughout the ordeal.

"I was praying despite the fact they were threatening me that I would face the same fate of the six brothers who were shot dead in the forest," he said.

After the miracle of being able to escape during a lull in their vigil, God rescued him from other potential dangers in his trek to freedom, he said.

"I was interrogated three times at three different check-points, but God covered their eyes to keep them from discovering me," he said. "I think God is teaching me that I still have a mission to accomplish; that was why he rescued me from the hand of Muslims."

As do other Christians in the north since South Sudan split from Sudan on July 9, he believes the Islamic government is targeting Christians in an attempt to clear Christianity from South Kordofan - part of a strategy to turn the north into a purely Islamic state.

"This is clearly a planned persecution by the Islamic government," he said. "My life is in great danger, as they are still looking for me. I may be arrested at any time and even killed."

Other Christians who have fled the area say many Christians have been killed and church buildings burned by the SAF and Islamic militias.

Armed conflict in Kadugli broke out between southern and northern militaries on June 6 after northern forces seized Abyei in May.

Assurances Questioned

With reports of military forces targeting Christians and churches in South Kordofan, assurances by a Sudanese official this month that *sharia* (Islamic law) would protect Christians in the north were not warmly received.

At a seminar organized by a U.S.-based Christian support group in Khartoum on Sept. 20, Azahry al-Tighani Awad el Sayeed, federal minister of Guidance and Religious Endowments, told church leaders that Islamic law would protect the rights of Christians in Sudan. The statement outraged Christians in Sudan, who voiced their concern that sharia – currently only “a source of legislation,” according to the Interim National Constitution – will become the law itself.

Sudan’s laws and policies already favor Islam, and sharia would make citizenship rights dependent on religion, relegating non-Muslims to second-class status with limited privileges and rights, the Christian leaders said.

“I am against the sharia as a Sudanese Christian because it undermines my basic right and it also does not allow us to co-exist,” said one Christian on condition of anonymity.

Church leaders also objected to hostile rhetoric against Christians by Islamic leaders and government officials, sources said. At some Friday mosque services, imams exhort their followers to decline to cooperate with Christians, and in some cases not even greet them because they are “infidels,” they said.

They also objected to government leaders labeling churches as foreign institutions with links to the West.

“Some people think that the church is a foreign institution existing to implement foreign agendas, but the fact is that is totally false and baseless,” said the unnamed Christian.

Bishop Ezekiel Kondo of Episcopal Church of Sudan said that Christians have long faced discrimination, and that the government still denies permits to acquire and build church buildings. He also criticized the ongoing Islamization of school curricula that omits the history of Christian kingdoms from textbooks.

Catholic priest in war-torn Sudanese State repeatedly detained

Previously tortured clergyman threatened with death if he returns to area of South Kordofan

Compass Direct News (19.09.2011) / HRWF (29.09.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – A Roman Catholic priest of Kadugli parish in Sudan’s embattled South Kordofan is in hiding after being detained three times in the past three months.

Authorities tortured the Rev. Abraham Lual on two of those occasions with accusations that as a Christian he opposes northern forces’ military campaign in the disputed region, he told Compass by phone.

Detained at 10:20 a.m. on Sept. 6 and interrogated for five hours at the security unit’s head office in El-Obied, Lual told Compass that authorities are monitoring his movements and those of other church leaders on the assumption that they are supported by Western Christians opposed to Islam and the north’s military push for territory in South Kordofan.

He was also detained for two days in Kadugli, the capital of South Kordofan, on Aug. 28, and the torture he suffered left him with injuries to his left leg, he said. Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) agents had also arrested him on June 8, accusing him of preaching that people should oppose the Islamic government, he said; authorities tortured him for two days at that time as well.

Lual's church building had been gutted by fire in the fighting, and during the Aug. 28 interrogation authorities threatened to kill him if he returned to visit the burned structure in the war-torn town, he said.

"You are preaching against Islamic government and opposing its teaching and rules," they said as they beat him, he said.

Lual said it will take him a long time to recover from the trauma of the Aug. 28 mistreatment.

"I am totally traumatized as a result of what they did to me and members of my congregation," he said. "They have badly mistreated me. I ask God to help me remain strong in faith as well as my displaced members and all Christian communities who are facing persecution."

Armed conflict in Kadugli broke out between southern and northern militaries on June 6 after northern forces seized Abyei in May.

Christian sources said Sudanese authorities in the Muslim-majority north are targeting Christians in the battle for South Kordofan because officials seek to rid Sudan of Christianity, which they perceive as anti-Islam and pro-West, Christian sources said. Lual said he has become the target of security forces because he is a church leader.

"On my arrival there, they were already monitoring my movements without my knowledge," he said. "They also asked about who the church is getting money from and who are supporting the missionary activities."

Lual said he went to Kadugli to see the remnants of the church buildings that were destroyed three months ago, when forces loyal to the Sudan government and supported by Islamic militias "killed Christians and destroyed churches."

"Most of the congregation members have been displaced, and some of them were even shot dead," he told Compass by phone. "They are now like sheep without a shepherd."

Christian sources in South Kordofan have confirmed that SAF and Islamic militias in Kadugli burned church schools and church buildings, he said.

"They burned the Catholic church and looted everything, as well as other churches in Kadugli such as the Sudanese Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church of Sudan and the Sudan Presbyterian Church of Sudan," Lual said.

The military forces burned a Catholic guest house in Kadugli and the church's Comboni School, he added.

"My main concern is my scattered congregation, most of whom have become displaced in their own home land," he said, "and the Islamic government continues to refuse aid agencies seeking to provide assistance to the stricken displaced, saying that this will give room to Christian organizations to step in and Christianize the region."

Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir told media on Aug. 23 that the government did not want any relief assistance unless humanitarian organizations first handed it over to officials to distribute. Al-Bashir, wanted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity in Darfur, asserted last year that after the July 9 separation from South Sudan, (north) Sudan would be based on sharia (Islamic law) and Islamic culture, with Arabic as the official language.

Muslim extremists in Sudan threaten to target Christians

Pastors in north fear increased persecution from local and foreign Islamic extremists

Special to Compass Direct News

Compass Direct News (13.09.2011) / HRWF (14.09.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Muslim extremists have sent text messages to at least 10 church leaders in Khartoum saying they are planning to target Christian leaders, buildings and institutions, Christian sources in Khartoum said.

"We want this country to be purely an Islamic state, so we must kill the infidels and destroy their churches all over Sudan," said one text message circulating in Khartoum last month. The text messages were sent in July and August.

Church leaders here said they fear more persecution as they and their flocks become targets of local Islamists. In addition, Muslim extremists from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh arrive in Sudan every two weeks to undergo training in secret camps in Khartoum before they are sent to various parts of Sudan to preach Islam and demolish church buildings, according to a Christian source in Khartoum.

On July 18 a group of Muslim extremists attacked the home of Anglican Church of Sudan Bishop Andudu Adam Elnail in an attempt to kill him and two other pastors, Luka Bulus and Thomas Youhana, who all happened to be out of the house at the time, sources said. No one was hurt, but the assailants left a threatening letter warning them of similar attacks.

Bulus is a supporter of the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement, a southern Sudan militant group long locked in battle with northern government forces, further making him a target of Islamic extremists. Bishop Elnail, whose church building the Sudanese military burned in June in war-torn Kadugli of South Kordofan region, oversees Nuba Mountain Episcopal churches as head of the Kadugli Episcopal Diocese.

Bulus confirmed the July 18 house attack, which took place in Omdurman, the twin city of Khartoum, at around 7 p.m., by telephone from his hiding place. Muslim extremists are still searching for him, the sources said.

"We are aware of your anti-Islamic activities," the letter left in Bishop Elnail's home states. "We have been monitoring the evangelization that you carry out these days, and therefore we declare Jihad against you."

The letter left on the gate of the bishop's house asserts that Sudan is an Islamic land, and that the authors secretly plan to carry out a series of attacks to destroy church buildings across "Sudan," which denotes the north following the secession of South Sudan on July 9.

"We declare Jihad against you in order to protect Muslims from your infidel influence, because you are the enemy of Islam," it states.

Christian sources in Khartoum said they take the threats seriously.

"These people are not joking – they can kill any Christian," said a church leader who requested anonymity for security reasons.

Elnail of the Kadugli Episcopal Diocese told a U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee on Africa on Aug. 4 that he was not sure he would be alive if he had not been called to Washington, D.C. to testify.

"I am told that armed men went house to house, searching for me, calling my name," Elnail reportedly told the congressional representatives.

In an incident on June 28, Muslim extremists burned down a church building belonging to the Lutheran Evangelical Church of the Sudan at 7:38 p.m. in Omdurman. Christian sources said two people were seen running out of the church building as it went up in flames.

"The Muslims are targeting our church in fear that many Muslims will leave Islam for Christianity," says a Lutheran Evangelical Church of the Sudan letter, written in Arabic, that was circulated to churches in Khartoum.

The destroyed Evangelical Lutheran Church building was opposite the Ansar Al Suna Mosque, where preachers publicly insult Christianity every Friday, a Christian source said.

Hostilities toward Christians by the Islamic government in Khartoum began to increase last year following a statement by President Omar al-Bashir, when he asserted that his second republic would be based on sharia (Islamic law) and Islamic culture, with Arabic as the official language.

The Rev. Ramadan Chan Liol, general secretary of the Sudan Council of Churches, told Ecumenical News International last month that threats have caused Christians to stay away from some church services, and some government leaders have ordered pastors to close down churches without proper documentation.

Church building in North Sudan in ruins as hostilities grow

Presbyterian congregation sees little hope of rebuilding amid growing anti-Christian sentiment

Special to Compass Direct News

Compass Direct News (23.08.2011) / HRWF (24.08.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - More than seven months after Muslim extremists burned its church building, a Presbyterian Church of the Sudan (PCOS) congregation is still afraid to meet for worship, according to Christian sources.

The Rev. Maubark Hamad said his church in Wad Madani, 138 kilometers (85 miles) southeast of Khartoum, has not been able to rebuild since the Jan. 15 devastation due to the congregation's meager resources.

"Nothing has been done for the burned church building; so far it has not been rebuilt," he told Compass by phone.

Christian sources said they are increasingly fearful as Muslim extremists pose more threats against Christians in an attempt to rid what they call Dar al Islam, the "Land of Islam," of Christianity.

"The increased challenges now faced by many Christians in North Sudan are something for which we need to pray very hard for the Lord to intervene," said another church leader on condition of anonymity.

The PCOS building in Wad Madani was burned after a series of threats against its members by Muslims extremists, sources said.

"These anti-Christian activities continue to be growing these days, aiming to cause fear among the believers in North Sudan," said the church leader.

When PCOS leaders reported the case to police in Wad Madani, they were surprised to find officers reluctant to investigate. At press time the assailants had not been arrested.

Property damages to the church building were estimated at 2,000 Sudanese pounds (US\$740); destroyed items included Christian literature, Bibles in local languages, chairs, tables and a pulpit.

"Muslims target our church because they don't want anything that is related to the church," one church member said.

Christians in North Sudan are living beneath a blanket of fear since South Sudan seceded on July 9. Just one month after the South voted for independence from the predominantly Islamic North, pressures on churches and Christians have increased, with Muslim groups threatening to destroy churches, kill Christians and purge the country of Christianity.

One anti-Christian newspaper with strong ties to the North's ruling party continuously advocates that North Sudan become a purely Islamic state and a purely Arab country. The Al Intibaha Arabic daily is well-known for provoking Muslims against Christians in Sudan.

North Sudan's predominantly Arab population has intermingled with several indigenous peoples, leading some other Arab nations to regard it as not "pure Arab," according to Operation World. Besides striving for an Arab-based ethnic-religious purging in North Sudan, Islamists may also be trying to counter estimated losses among adherents to Islam, with some estimating the Muslim population of the formerly unified Sudan recently dropping to about 55 percent from 61 percent.

Hostilities toward Christians by the Islamic government in Khartoum began to increase last year following a statement by President Omar al-Bashir, when he asserted that his second republic would be based on sharia (Islamic law) and Islamic culture, with Arabic as the official language.

Kidnapped Christian girl in Sudan escapes, traumatized

Muslim abductors tried to force her to convert to Islam

Special to Compass Direct News

Compass Direct News (03.082011) / HRWF (17.08.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Hiba Abdelfadil Anglo, 16, has escaped from a gang of Muslims who kidnapped her last year, but it may be a long time before she recovers from the trauma.

As she told Compass how the kidnapers beat, raped and tried to force her to convert from Christianity to Islam, she broke into tears for nearly half an hour.

"They did many bad things to me," she said, tears streaming down her eyes.

Abducted on June 17, 2010, she was reunited with her family on July 10.

"Several times I was warned that if I do not convert to Islam, then I risk losing my life," she said. "The man who put me in his house on several occasions tortured me and threatened to kill me. He did not allow me to pray Christian prayers. He even insulted my family as a family of infidels."

Hiba said that after a year of captivity, she had given the unidentified man who housed her enough of an impression that she had converted to Islam and accepted her fate that he left her unguarded. She was able to leave the house in the Soba Al Aradi area south of Khartoum and beg a motorist to take her to her home two hours away, she said.

"I had tried to escape three times before, but they captured me every time and beat me a lot," she said, sobbing.

Her widowed mother, Ikhlas Omer Anglo, told Compass the kidnapers targeted them because they are Christians, members of Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church in Khartoum. The girl's mother said that when she went to a police station to open a case, officers told her she must first leave Christianity for Islam.

"Right after my daughter was kidnapped, one officer told me, 'If you want back your daughter, you should become a Muslim,'" she said. "I thank God for enabling my daughter to escape before the start of Ramadan, though she is now traumatized."

Hiba said the kidnapers moved her to various locations in Khartoum over the initial eight months, threatening to kill her if she tried to escape.

"Even if you call the government, they will not do anything to us," her abductors warned her, she said.

She was initially locked in a room and beaten until she was unconscious. The leader of the group raped her, and she is still suffering pain in her right eye from a blow he recently dealt her, she said.

"Apart from abusing me sexually, he tried to force me to change my faith and kept reminding me to prepare for Ramadan," she said. "I cannot forget this bad incident, and whenever I try to pray, I find it difficult to forget. I ask believers to pray for me for inner healing."

At the same time, Hiba said prayer was the only effective option while in captivity.

"I was praying to God to keep me and my family safe," she said.

Last year the then-15-year-old Hiba was kidnapped while going to the Ministry of Education in Khartoum to obtain her transcripts for entry into secondary school.

"One of the kidnapers was monitoring me as I was going to the Ministry of Education," she said. "He pretended to have been working in the Ministry of Education."

Two days after she was abducted, the family received threatening telephone calls and SMS (text) messages from the kidnappers telling them to pay 1,500 Sudanese pounds (US\$560) in order to secure her return.

"Don't you want to have this slave back?" one of the kidnappers told her mother from an unknown location by cell phone, Anglo said. She lost her job after taking time off to search for her missing daughter last year, she said, as her employer initially gave her time off in order to seek her daughter but later used the absence as a pretext for firing her.

"It is good that those who prayed for us to know that their prayers were answered, and that my daughter is back at home with me," Anglo said. "I also need prayers because I am jobless since the time my daughter was kidnapped."

Hoping to study to be an accountant after missing an academic year, Hiba said her future is unknown as her family is unable to afford school. She also fears the Muslim criminals might still be trailing her.

Sudanese Military, Militias kill Christians in South Kordofan

Two dead, two others tortured on day when at least three church buildings are attacked

Special to Compass Direct News

Compass Direct News (17.06.2011) / HRWF (22.06.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Military intelligence agents killed one Christian, and Islamic militants sympathetic to the government slaughtered another last week after attacking churches in Sudan's embattled South Kordofan state.

Christian sources said a Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) Intelligence unit detained Nimeri Philip Kalo, a student at St. Paul Major Seminary, on June 8 near the gate of the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) in Kadugli's al Shaeer area and shot him in front of bystanders. Kalo and other Christians were fleeing the town after Muslim militias loyal to the SAF attacked and looted at least three church buildings in Kadugli, they said.

UNMIS's mandate is to support the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government of Sudan and the country's Christian and animist south, scheduled to secede on July 9, by helping in the disarmament process, among other means. Armed conflict in Kadugli broke out between southern and northern militaries on June 6 after northern forces seized Abyei last month.

SAF military intelligence agents accused Kalo of being a Christian and suspected he was therefore opposed to the Islamic government, the sources said.

"They shot him in front of our eyes and forced us not to cry, or else we would face the same fate," a Christian source told Compass on condition of anonymity. Likewise, another Christian survivor said while breaking into tears, "They killed him in front of my eyes."

On the same day, Islamic militants loyal to the SAF slaughtered a young Christian man by sword in Kadugli Market, the sources said. Adeeb Gismalla Aksam, 33, a bus driver

whose father is an elder with the Evangelical Church in Kadugli, was murdered by Muslim extremists shouting, "Allahu-akbar [God is greater]!"

The Islamic militias were heard shouting "Allahu-akbar!" as they began shooting at a Roman Catholic Church building at 3:30 p.m. on June 8, during a mass in which the congregants were asking God to protect them.

"As we were praying, they started to pour bullets at us to the point that we were terribly scared," a Christian who escaped the attack told Compass.

No one was hit by the bullets shot at the building from the outside, but SAF agents on June 8 arrested the Rev. Abraham James Lual in front of his congregation, a priest of a Kadugli parish told Compass. Accusing Lual of preaching that people should oppose the Islamic government, authorities took him to an unknown location and tortured him two days, releasing him the following morning, the priest said.

The Rev. Paul Okeny, another Catholic priest, told Compass that Islamic militias loyal to the SAF looted other churches in Kadugli as well, besides attacking Lual's church and depriving him of his belongings.

"Authorities confiscated all his belonging and denied him his cell phone," Okeny told Compass.

Christians were in shock as they have become targets for Islamic militants working with the Government of Sudan, sources said.

Another Christian who requested anonymity said he was arrested at gunpoint by SAF military Intelligence agents at 8:30 a.m. on June 8. Accusing him of being anti-Islam and therefore opposed to the Islamic government, the security officers took him to a military jail, where he was severely beaten and "kicked like a ball," he said.

According to the Christian, one high-ranking official told another, "Why shouldn't you shoot him in his house so that his body gets rotten in his own house?" After taking him to his house, they started to torture him with sticks, guns and knives, saying, "We will kill you," he said.

"I was praying to God to be with me and forgive them," he told Compass. "I thought that was my end, but thank God I was released, but warned to quit the town. As I was running they opened fire on me, but the motorbike was running very fast, so no bullet hit me."

They called after him, "Make sure we will not see your face again," he added.

The SAF and Islamic militias on June 8 also set fire to buildings of the Episcopal Church of Sudan and the Sudanese Church of Christ in Kadugli, sources said.

"I saw a building of the Episcopal Church of Sudan in flames," said one eyewitness.

The Rt. Rev. Bishop Andudu Adam Elnail of the Episcopal Diocese of Kadugli confirmed the incident.

"The churches and pastors were directly targeted," he said. "The guesthouse in Kadugli, where my staff lives, was looted. The militias and SAF broke into the church building, taking all property, including the sound system, projector, beds, chairs and two motorbikes, including one of the bishop's."

On Sunday (June 12), North Kordofan Gov. Mutasim Mirghani Zaki El-deen declared jihad

(holy war) on the Nuba people, most of whom are Christians.

Christians in the area said they are still traumatized as result of the atrocities committed against them by Sudan security forces and militias loyal to the government military. Sources in Sudan said Christians are calling their brothers and sisters worldwide to pray for the crisis in South Kordofan.

"The situation is critical – we need other Christians to fast and pray for us," said one source.

Christian woman in Darfur, Sudan arrested for evangelizing

Another, mother of 2-month-old, is wounded in knife attacks

By Simba Tian

Compass Direct News (24.05.2011) / HRWF (31.05.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – Sudanese National Security Intelligence and Security Service agents have arrested a Christian woman in a Darfur camp for displaced people, accusing her of converting Muslims to Christianity, said sources who fear she is being tortured.

At the same time, in Khartoum a Christian mother of a 2-month-old baby is wounded and destitute because she and her husband left Islam for Christianity.

In Darfur Region in northwestern Sudan, Hawa Abdalla Muhammad Saleh was arrested on May 9 in the Abu Shouk camp for Internally Displaced Persons in Al-Fashir, capital of North Darfur state, sources said.

Abdalla has yet to be officially charged, but authorities have accused her of possessing and distributing Bibles to others in the camp, including children. Sources said she could also be tried for apostasy, which carries the death sentence in Sudan.

Abdalla has been transferred to an unknown location in Khartoum, sources said, adding that they fear she could be tortured as she was detained and tortured for six days in 2009. Intelligence agents, they said, have been monitoring her movements for some time.

"There is no guarantee of her safety," said one source in Darfur.

The U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report 2010 notes that while Sudan's Interim National Constitution provides for freedom of religion throughout the country, it establishes sharia (Islamic law) as a source of legislation in the north.

The arrest comes as northern Christians become more vulnerable to official and societal pressure with South Sudan set to split from the predominantly Muslim north on July 9. Adding to tensions was the north's weekend military attack on Abyei Town, located in a disputed, oil-rich region to which both South Sudan and the north lay claim.

Knife Attacks

In Khartoum, the Christian couple with the newborn said they have come under attack for converting from Islam to Christianity.

Omar Hassan and Amouna Ahamdi, both 27, said they fled Nyala, 120 kilometers (75 miles) southwest of El-Fashir, for Khartoum in June 2010, but knife-wielding, masked assailants on May 4 attacked the couple after relatives learned that they had converted from Islam to Christianity. Hassan told Compass that he and his wife were renting a house from her uncle in Khartoum, but he ordered them to leave after learning they had left Islam.

His wife was injured trying to protect him during the May 4 attack, he told Compass.

"I have been in Khartoum for six months, with no job to support my sick wife," Hassan said. "Muslims invaded our house and, in an attempt to kill me, they knifed my wife in the hand."

The knife pierced the palm of Ahamdi, who said her brother had stabbed her three times in the stomach nine months ago, seriously injuring her spleen, after she told him she had become a Christian.

"I feel pain, but my husband is alive, and we are praying that we get money for treatment for both my hand and the spleen," she said.

In the violent outburst, her brother also broke her left leg. She was rushed to a local hospital, where personnel were reluctant to treat her because of her conversion, sources told Compass. Ultimately she was hospitalized in Nyala Teaching Hospital for three weeks – where she met Hassan, a recent convert who had also suffered for his faith who visited her after hearing how her family hurt her.

He said he found no one caring for her even though she was in agony. He called an Episcopal Church of Sudan (ECS) pastor to help her, and she was discharged after partial recovery – to the hostile home where she had been attacked.

"You don't deserve to be a member of my family," her angry father shouted at her, she said.

Her family locked her in a room, shackled to a wooden chair, and severely beat her for a month.

"I was badly mistreated – they shaved all my hair and my father whipped my head," Ahamdi said. "But neighbors used to sneak in secretly and provided me food and water."

After freeing her from the chair, they restricted her movement to the property, she said.

"I found a chance to escape to the ECS church, where I got married to Hassan," she said. "My health continued deteriorating, and the doctors recommended that I be transferred to Khartoum for specialized treatment for my ailing spleen. With a small amount of money, we managed to reach Khartoum by train, where my uncle hosted us not knowing that we were Christians."

In Khartoum, they were unable to afford the medicine prescribed for her spleen.

"There is only one pharmaceutical shop in Khartoum that deals with spleen-related problems," Ahamdi said. "The shop has to order the drug from Cairo after making a deposit amounting to US\$300 before the drug is ordered. But we are not able to raise the needed amount since we are jobless."

Hassan and Ahamdi depend on friends to provide them occasional food, she said. They sometimes go without eating for two days, she said.

"We cannot deny Christ – this is a big challenge to us, because we do not have a place to go," she said, through tears. "We have no food, and we are jobless. I am still in pain, besides having a 2-month-old baby boy to care for."

Path of Faith

Born in Shendi, north of Khartoum, Hassan was raised in Nyala, son of an imam belonging to the Ansar Al-Sunna, a sect of Sunni Muslims. He said he started questioning the Quran while accompanying his father on a preaching mission in Omdarfu, an area bordering Darfur and the Central African Republic.

A high-profile Muslim from Europe happened to be in the area, and young Hassan asked him questions about Muhammad and Jesus, he said. He found no immediate answers.

The following day, the European Muslim told his father that Hassan should be warned that soon he could become an infidel or kafir. Hassan denied it when his father summoned him, but the family grew uneasy with him and took his job away. He said he felt he was wasting his time in spreading Islam, and people began suspecting that he had converted to Christianity even though he had not yet done so.

He said he decided to be without faith, and his father denied him all basic needs. After obtaining work as a security guard with a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), he began comparing Christianity and Islam with his workmate. His friend invited him to visit a church, and Hassan also began attending a Bible study.

Hassan said he began having dreams and visions and heard a voice saying, "This is the way." He told this to church pastor, who told him it referred to Jesus saying it of Himself in John 14:6.

"A desire for attending church grew in me, and thereafter I got baptized," Hassan said. "The pastor encouraged me to keep on praying. One morning, when I was on my knees praying, my father entered into the room and found me."

Furious, his father called out to him, but Hassan did not reply.

"He then hit me with a big stick on the back of my neck," he said. "He closed the door, invited seven relatives plus my elder brother, who started beating me with sticks and broke my shoulder. I almost lost my sight. My elder brother helped me escape to the pastor's house, where I was hospitalized for 13 days."

After recovering, he returned to the pastor's house, where he continued working with the NGO on a temporary basis. Early in 2007, he said, he met his uncle in the market, who tricked him into returning home, where his father beat him. His mother helped him escape, and a Christian from South Sudan took him to a hospital.

His pastor sent him to Khartoum, but he ended up working for another NGO in Juba, where he joined the ECS church. With his faith strengthened, he returned to Nyala when the contract ended in 2007. When he reached home, his father realized that he remained a Christian and ordered him to leave and never return.

He returned to the ESC congregation in Nyala, and in 2008 the church sent him to Shokaya Bible Institute for six months. Upon completion he returned to the church and married Ahamdi in June 2010.

They soon fled persecution to Khartoum, where their trials have continued.

"We have been given notice to vacate the house," Hassan said. "Life is becoming unbearable for us here in Khartoum."

'Blasphemy' laws in Egypt and Sudan threaten converts

Statutes stand amid change in Islamic countries with Christian populations

By Wayne King and Simba Tian

Compass Direct News (11.05.2011) / HRWF (12.05.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - Shifting political winds in the north African countries of Egypt and Sudan will leave their mark on history, but local attitudes ensure one thing remains unchanged: the laws against defaming Islam will stand like granite in a sandstorm.

As Egyptians continue to grapple with a revolution and seek freedoms commonplace in other parts of the world, there is no sign that Egypt's version of an anti-blasphemy law will be changed. And in Sudan, where the non-Islamic south is set to split from the Islamic north on July 9, Christians remaining in the north are more vulnerable than ever to baseless accusations of defaming Islam.

The law in Egypt, in theory meant to discourage people from offending others' religious sensitivities, is instead used to stifle free speech and punish and intimidate those who do not subscribe to the standard, Orthodox version of Sunni Islam practiced by most in Egypt, human rights advocates and religious dissident groups said.

"In general in Egypt, things are in flux, but because these particular issues are so hot button, I would not expect, even with a new regime, any changes in these laws," said Paul Marshall, a senior fellow at the Center for Religious Freedom at the Hudson Institute.

Still, Marshall said that after the national demonstrations of Jan. 25-Feb. 11 that led to the ousting of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, there may be changes coming in the way the statutes are applied; there is hope that they won't be used "simply to shut people up."

Crushing Non-Conformity

Article 98(f), known to Egyptian attorneys as the "contempt of religion" charge, states, "Whoever exploits religion in order to promote extremist ideologies by word of mouth, in writing or in any other manner, with a view to stirring up sedition, disparaging or contempt of any divine religion or its adherents, or prejudicing national unity shall be punished with imprisonment between six months and five years or paying a fine of at least 500 Egyptian pounds [US\$85]."

Strictly speaking, Article 98(f) is not an anti-blasphemy law, but it is used in much the same way as other anti-blasphemy laws throughout the Middle East and the greater Islamic world. Violating this statute is known as having "defamed a heavenly religion." Others have been charged under the statute with "insulting Islam."

Ashraf Thabet, 45, knows all too well about being charged with defaming a heavenly religion. The Port Said import merchant was a committed Muslim most of his life until an economic downturn and a canceled business deal gave him the spare time to investigate Islam more closely. What started as a quest to find deeper meaning within his religion led him to embrace Christianity. As he expressed his struggle and his newfound ideas to

others, Thabet found himself on the losing end of a battle with Egypt's State Security Intelligence service (SSI).

During an early morning arrest on March 22, 2010, SSI agents kicked down the door of his apartment, assaulted him in front of his family and dragged him off to prison. Accused of violating Article 98(f), Thabet spent 132 days in solitary confinement but was never brought to court.

Thabet said he believed the SSI left the charges unresolved to harass and pressure him to convert back to Islam. His case, still unresolved, is typical of the way the law is used to punish people not for actually insulting any religion but for choosing a spiritual path not accepted by the government. It is what is known as a "status crime," where one isn't punished for doing something, but rather for being something. Status crimes have been stricken from the legal codes of most countries.

"If you become a Christian, you are likely to be accused of insulting Islam on grounds that you left, and therefore you are [supposedly] saying it's bad," Marshall said.

By comparison, no convert from Christianity to Islam has ever been charged with Article 98(f) for defiling Christianity.

Converts to Christianity aren't alone in falling prey to the law. People in Egypt who follow the Baha'i faith, adherents to the Islamic Shia tradition and numerous other non-Sunnis have all been brought up on defamation charges. In some cases, Sunnis who have expressed non-conformist opinions have been accused of defamation. Several Sunni journalists, bloggers, lawyers, university professors, at least one renowned poet and a Nobel laureate have all been accused of religious defamation – not for actually insulting Islam or any other tradition, but merely for exploring non-orthodox ideas about religion.

"Muslims who hold unorthodox views are held to be insulting Islam or insulting a heavenly religion," Marshall said.

Perhaps the most famous defamation case in Egypt against a Muslim was that of Nasr Hamed Abu Zaid, a Sunni Islamic scholar. Abu Zaid's work dealt with interpreting the Quran in a historical context. Accused by officials at Al-Azhar University of defaming Islam, he was ruled in court to be an apostate. Because a non-Muslim man cannot be married to a Muslim woman, a court issued proceedings to nullify his marriage. In 1995, he fled to the Netherlands with his wife.

Later returning to Egypt, Abu Zaid died in August 2010 in Cairo of a cerebral infection.

"Generically, I would call that a blasphemy case because he wrote about Islam in a way Al-Azhar and others did not like," Marshall said.

According to Azza Taher Matar of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, cases of a Muslim accused of defamation for holding a dissenting view are the most common ones.

"Most cases result from Muslims debating Islam or Islamic history and the Arabic empire," Matar said. "When [religious] debates or conflicts heat up, they are usually solved in a political way."

Human rights advocates say it is nearly impossible to find out how many people are charged under the defamation statute in Egypt. It is not pandemic, but it is certainly not uncommon. Matar said her group is not defending any defamation cases.

Unequal Enforcement

Another aspect of the law is that it is enforced unequally and in a way that is seemingly meant to protect the sensitivities of the majority from the minority, but not the other way around. In effect, the majority is given free rein to insult or even vilify religious minorities in the country.

While Judaism and Christianity are considered "revealed" religions under the Quran, no other religious traditions are, and therefore the defamation statute offers them no protection under the law. Using the Baha'i and Zoroastrian traditions as examples, Marshall said they are "not regarded as heavenly religions, so you may insult them all you want."

Even the protections that in theory are extended to Judaism and Christianity are tenuous at best. Anti-Semitism is rife in Egypt. People insult Judaism and its adherents in the media and in the public arena "everyday and every way in Egypt" without anyone being called to task under 98(f), according to Marshall.

"The law is in principle insulting any one of those religions. In practice, you can insult Judaism all you want, even on state media," he said.

On a few rare occasions, the state has intervened when media professionals have insulted Christianity on television, but by and large, people "defame" Christianity and its core ideas in the public sphere with no recrimination.

"You can hear it on loudspeakers in the street," Marshall said. "You will find it on school television programs. You will find it in school textbooks. You will find that in books issued by government ministries."

After a church bombing in Alexandria last New Year's Eve, when at least 22 people were killed, Coptic Christians complained that it is commonplace in Alexandria for imams to launch into anti-Christian tirades during Friday afternoon prayers. In several instances in southern Egypt, rioters have attacked Christian-held businesses on prompting from imams during Friday prayers. In Egypt, imams' salaries are paid for in part by government-approved Islamic institutions.

No Public Outcry

Outside of human rights groups and a few religious groups, there has been no large outcry to reform the law.

According to a survey conducted in 2009 by WorldPublicOpinion.org, 71 percent of Egyptians agreed with the statement, "The government should have the right to fine or imprison people who publically criticize a religion because such criticism could defame the religion." WorldPublicOpinion.org is run by the Program on International Policy Attitudes by the University of Maryland.

Part of the reason the laws are unlikely to change is that Article 2 of the Egyptian Constitution states, "Islam is the Religion of the State. Arabic is its official language, and the principal source of legislation is Islamic Jurisprudence."

Although the Egyptian Constitution also has laws enshrining freedom of religion and expression, Article 2 supersedes those laws, rendering them ineffective. There has been widespread pressure from Coptic and secular groups to do away with Article 2, but the recent national referendum to reform the constitution did not include any language to strike the article.

The referendum passed with 77 percent voting in favor of its reforms; defamation laws remained intact.

Offense of the Cross

In Sudan's Sunni Muslim-majority north, where apostasy (leaving Islam) is punishable by death, the maximum sentence for violating the country's blasphemy law is milder than Egypt's maximum of five years in prison, but potentially more painful.

Violation of Section 125 of the Sudanese Criminal Act, which prohibits "insulting religion, inciting hatred and showing contempt for religious beliefs," is punishable by imprisonment of one year, a fine, and 40 lashes.

As in Egypt, the law can be used as a pretext for taking legal action against anyone who leaves Islam, since conversion to Christianity itself can be interpreted as "insulting" or "showing contempt" for Islam.

"This article is being used by the police to crush any person who leaves Islam for Christianity," said one Sudanese convert to Christianity.

One Sudanese lawyer, a Muslim, said the law is seen as protective.

"The importance of this section is that it helps protect Islamic religion from being insulted, and it also discourages those who do not want to respect other religions," said Nasour Badr in Khartoum.

The Christian convert said that sentiment can be easily manipulated.

"This article is important to Muslims in Sudan since it gives the right to any Muslim to file cases against converts from Muslim backgrounds and other Christians as well," he said. "The law can also be used by the government to arrest individuals who may oppose the government."

Christians remaining in the north are particularly vulnerable, and the U.S. Department of State's latest International Religious Freedom Report describes Khartoum as having a "significant Christian population," due in part to migration during the long civil war.

"The Roman Catholic Church of Sudan and the Episcopal Churches of Sudan estimate they have 6 million and 5 million baptized followers, respectively, although active churchgoers are far fewer," the report notes, adding that there are also small but long-established groups of Orthodox Christians in Khartoum and in other northern cities, including Coptic Orthodox and Greek Orthodox communities.

"There are also Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox communities, largely made up of refugees and migrants, in Khartoum and the east," according to the report.

While convictions may be rare, Christian converts from Islam said they continue to be victims of Sudan's blasphemy law.

"In many cases this law continues to be used by the police to harass everyone who tries to express his or her belief in public," said another convert from Islam on condition of anonymity.

He said police arrested one such convert in downtown Khartoum in 2009; not until the convert arrived at the police station did he find out, to his surprise, that authorities were opening a case against him under Article 125 for offense against any religious belief.

"He was falsely accused of insulting Islam, even though at the time of his arrest he was speaking only about his faith in Jesus," the Christian said of the other arrested convert. "The police were angry with that move, so they arrested him and jailed him for few hours before they released him for lack of enough evidence against him. He was basically arrested because of his faith."

While one church leader noted that Article 125 is "a weapon in the hand of the government to file accusations against Christians," Christians are not the only ones vulnerable within the Sudanese population. In November 2007, a British teacher was jailed in Khartoum under the article for insulting Islam by letting her class of 7-year-olds name a teddy bear Muhammad as part of a school project.

Gillian Gibbons, 54, was charged under Section 125 and convicted on one of three counts, "insulting religion," on Nov. 29, 2007. She was sentenced to 15 days in prison and deportation.

She had suggested to her students that they name their teddy bear, the new class mascot, "Faris," but 20 of the 23 children decided they wanted to name it "Muhammad," after one of the class's most popular boys.

Most Sunni Muslims forbid any depiction of Muhammad. An office assistant at the school, Sara Khawad, had filed the complaint and was the primary witness in the prosecution.

The day after her sentencing, some 10,000 protestors in Khartoum demanded death for Gibbons after imams denounced her during Friday prayers. Ultimately, after intervention from British officials, she was granted a presidential pardon and released into the security of the British embassy in Khartoum.

In December 2007, the section was used against two Egyptian booksellers, Abdelfatah Al Sadani and Maharous Mahammad Abdelazeem, both 30. They were sentenced to six months in prison because they sold a book that the court deemed an insult to Aisha, one of Muhammad's wives.

The U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report 2010 notes that while Sudan's Interim National Constitution provides for freedom of religion throughout the country, it establishes *sharia* (Islamic law) as a source of legislation in the north. The official laws and policies of the Government of National Unity favor Islam in the north, while the constitution, laws and policies of Southern Sudan provide for freedom of religion "contributed to the generally free practice of religion."

The South has no penalties for apostasy or defaming religion, and evangelism is common. And while the State Department report notes that laws against blasphemy and defaming Islam in the north were rarely enforced last year, the threat they pose can be enough to restrict freedom of speech and freedom of religion – especially for converts.

"Those who leave Islam know they may be victims of this article," a source in Khartoum told Compass.
