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Morocco expels Christian evangelists

Global Post (12.08.2014) - For 10 years, foreign Christians ran an orphanage called Village of Hope on the slopes of Morocco's Middle Atlas Mountains, taking in abandoned Moroccan children and raising them in their homes.

But it took just a few hours Monday evening for Moroccan authorities to dissolve those foster families. Police gathered the 16 foreign volunteers and their biological children in a conference room and told them they had to leave the country immediately. Across the parking lot, 33 Moroccan children learned they would stay behind.

"It will be burned in my memory forever," said Chris Broadbent, a New Zealander who worked as an administrator at the orphanage. "These kids just screamed across the car park to their parents to ask them if it was true. It was just chaos and so distressing, so terrible. I've never seen or experienced anything like it."

Broadbent said Moroccan authorities took over the Village of Hope facility on Monday, but it is not yet clear whether the children will stay there or be sent somewhere else.

Morocco's Interior Ministry claims the group "exploited some families' poverty and targeted their minor children," violating rules on guardianship and breaking Morocco's laws against proselytizing to Muslims.

Foreign Christian leaders in Morocco say the deportations are part of a country-wide campaign that signals a tough new stance against foreign evangelists who had been tolerated here for years.

Broadbent said the staff never tried to convert anyone, and maintained the orphanage had followed the same policies since it opened a decade ago: The children learned the Quran in school, but were raised by Christian parents.

"We were we looking after them, because nobody else would," Broadbent said. "For 10 years they have openly, knowingly allowed us to do that and they never said we were breaking the law."

They are not the only foreign evangelists to suddenly find themselves on the wrong side of the Moroccan government. A western diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity, said authorities placed several dozen or more on a list for deportation.

In addition to orphanage volunteers approximately 10 other foreign Christians accused of proselytizing were deported over the weekend from cities across the country, pastors and Christian aid groups said.

Those expelled come from the Netherlands, Britain, the Congo, New Zealand, South Africa, Brazil and the United States.

"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," U.S. Ambassador Samuel Kaplan said in a statement. "While we expect all American citizens in Morocco to respect Moroccan law, we hope to see meaningful improvements in the application of due process in such cases."

U.S. embassy officials declined to confirm who or how many people would be expelled but said the number is likely to rise. Pastors who have lived in Morocco for years say the sheer quantity of deportations is unprecedented in recent years.

"It's like going to sleep and waking up and all of the sudden you're in a different country," said Jack Wald, who has spent 10 years as pastor of Rabat International Church, a protestant congregation in the capital. "This is a change in policy from the top of the government."

"In my nine years in Morocco, never," said Pastor Jean-Luc Blanc, authorized by the government to preach to foreigners at the Evangelical Church of Morocco. "Each year there are one or two expulsions like this, but never so many at one time."

But Moroccan Communication Minister Khalid Naciri maintains that the expulsions are neither new, nor limited to Christian missionaries.

"The Moroccan government today deals harshly with whoever allows themselves to manipulate the religion of the people," Naciri said. He cited government crackdowns on radical Islamist groups and expulsions of Shi'a Muslims proselytizing in this largely Sunni country.

Still, many in the expatriate Christian community here are wondering who's next. Police have interviewed children at another older orphanage, also run by Christian evangelists, a few miles from The Village of Hope.

"They asked 'Do you know the Quran?' and they quoted the Quran to them," said Jim Pitts, a native Virginian, has worked at the orphanage for 51 years.

Pitts says his staff members have come only to do charitable work and have never tried to convert anyone. But he's still unsure what the authorities will do.

"I don't know what's going to happen with us," he said. "We'll see."

'Proselytism' conviction of convert from Islam in Morocco overturned

Judge dismisses case, nullifying hasty 30-month sentence, fine

Morning Star News (06.02.2014) – An appeals court judge in Morocco today overturned a conviction against a Christian convert from Islam who had been sentenced to 30 months in prison for alleged proselytizing.

The judge in the Court of Appeal in Fez dismissed the case against Mohamed El Baladi, 31, because of lack of evidence, sources close to him said.

"The case has ended," said one source close to El Baladi who requested anonymity. "The file will be closed on the 13th of February after a routine administrative process is finished."

On Aug. 28, in the remote town of Ain Aicha, Taounate Province, 50 miles from Fez, security officials arrested El Baladi for alleged proselytizing of two Muslims after someone complained to police about a conversation he allegedly had with them about his faith. During the arrest, police insulted El Baladi for leaving Islam and tried to force him to reveal names of other converts to Christianity.

Police eventually raided his home where they seized several Christian CDs, books and magazines, along with the 5,000 dirhams, sources said.

On Sept. 3, no more than a week after his arrest, a court in Taounate found El Baladi guilty of attempting to incite at least one young Muslim to leave Islam and sentenced him to 30 months in prison, along with fining him 1,500 Moroccan dirhams (US\$182). (See [Morning Star News](#), Sept. 13, 2013.)

Human rights advocates said his hearing was irregular at best, with authorities finding El Baladi guilty without any legal representation and handing down the fine exceeding the maximum allowed by law. The penalty for violating Article 220 of Morocco's penal code regarding "proselytism" is six months to three years in prison and a fine of up to 500 dirhams (US\$60).

The penal code describes proselytizing as any attempt to stop someone from exercising their religious beliefs or from attending religious services. It is also illegal for anyone to employ "incitements to shake the faith of a Muslim or to convert him to another religion."

Authorities on Sept. 26, 2013, made the unusual decision to release him from prison until his appeal hearing. There were two scheduled court hearings for the appeal, one on Oct. 10, which was postponed, and one scheduled for Dec. 26, when the judge was absent; a previous report from Morocco published by Morning Star News that the court heard arguments on that date was later found to be inaccurate, although long-denied defense arguments were filed and the hearing was rescheduled for today (Feb. 6).

Having a conversation about one's faith is not generally considered proselytizing in Morocco, but sources confirmed reports that El Baladi was set up by an uncle with whom he had a previous dispute. The uncle hired two teenage boys to feign interest in Christianity, and police were on hand to arrest him for proselytizing minors when he met with them a second time (see [Morning Star News](#), Oct. 11, 2013).

Strict interpretation of *sharia* (Islamic law) condemns apostates from Islam to death, though that is not the case in Morocco. Moreover, converts from Islam in Morocco say the government tends to prosecute more noticeable evangelists. A quiet Christian convert is unlikely to run into problems other than from family, but "active" Christians who attempt to tell others about their faith will likely run into problems with government agencies, especially if they live in a rural area or a small city.

Police monitoring of converts, including phone conversations, is common, one convert from Islam said.

The West has generally applauded Morocco's new constitution of 2011, which provides for a fair trial and presumption of innocence until proven guilty for those accused of breaking the law. But a fatwa issued in 2012 by the governmental High Council of Ulemas, the highest religious authority in Morocco that called for the execution of converts, has caused concern among human rights and religious freedom advocates.

Morocco's King Mohammed VI is seen as a moderate, but Islam is the official religion of the state, and the king's titles include, "The Defender of the Faithful." Christians are also suspicious as his government shares power in a coalition that includes the Justice and

Development Party, which is considered to have links with the Muslim Brotherhood; the group calls for a society governed by Islam.

On Dec. 28, 2005, Christian convert Jamaa Ait Bakrim was sentenced to 15 years in prison for proselytism and for destroying the goods of others by burning two abandoned telephone poles touching his property.

In March 2010, the government expelled at least 33 Christian foreign residents from the country. Among them were 10 adult Christians, along with their children, who were running The Village of Hope, a foster daycare center for orphans. The foster children were turned over to the care of people they did not know.

In addition to the expulsions, roughly 81 people were declared "persona non grata" for alleged proselytizing.

There are about 8,000 Moroccan Christians out of a population of almost 35 million people, according to the 2012 International Religious Freedom Report of the U.S. Department of State.
