

Converts from Islam Jailed, Pursued in Somalia's Breakaway Region

✖ A convert from Islam in Somalia's self-declared state of Somaliland has been jailed for distributing Christian materials, and another is on the run from both family members and police upset over his new faith.

Christian sources said Somaliland native Osman Nour Hassan was arrested on Aug. 3 for providing Christian literature in Pepsi village, on the outskirts of the breakaway region's capital city, Hargeisa.

Promotion of any religion other than Islam in Somaliland is prohibited, contrary to international standards for religious freedom such as Article 18 of the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 5(1-2) of the Somaliland constitution states that Islam is the state religion and prohibits the promotion of any other faith, according to the U.S. Department of State's 2008 International Religious Freedom Report, and Article 313 outlines penalties for Muslims who change their religion.

Hassan was accused of providing Christian literature to a village Muslim boy, who later showed it to his family and friends. The boy's Muslim family reported the incident to the police, the sources said, leading to the arrest of the 29-year-old Hassan. He was taken to Hargeisa central police station.

The arrest has upset underground Christians who see it as a muzzle on religious expression. They said other Muslim villagers had received Christian materials from Hassan and took no offense, and that Christian Ethiopian refugees in the area have distributed the same literature without problem.

On Aug. 6, the Muslim family who accused Hassan met with his family and agreed that Islamic teachers, or sheikhs, should go to see him in jail to advise him on Islamic doctrine. Two sheikhs met him in the police station cell and implored him to stop spreading Christianity.

“You are from an Islamic family, and therefore you should not disgrace or paint a bad image of the family,” argued one of the sheikhs, according to a source who spoke with Hassan. In response, according to the source, Hassan told them that he had received the Christian materials as educational material for himself and for others who cared to read them, and that Jesus was his Savior.

Convinced that Hassan had truly left Islam, and angered by his defiance, the sheikhs urged authorities to take him to the harsher conditions of a jail in Mandera, 60 kilometers (37 miles) away, but at press time Hassan was still incarcerated in Hargeisa.

“His stand is that he is waiting for the coming of Issa [Jesus], just as the whole world is also waiting,” said one neighbor.

Somaliland, which is vying for international recognition as a nation, is bordered by the Gulf of Aden to the north, by Ethiopia to the southwest and by Djibouti to the northwest.

Fleeing Somaliland

Another Somaliland convert to Christianity, Mohamed G. Ali, is on the run from both authorities and family members. Ali has fled to neighboring Ethiopia, but the 27-year-old father of three said this will not be enough to deter relatives who seek to punish him for leaving Islam.

He said relatives previously abducted his wife, who is

expected to give birth to their fourth child within the next two weeks, and that they are again looking for ways to kidnap her as well as the children.

The native of Hargeisa said he has already survived several attempts on his life by Muslim fanatics since becoming a Christian in 1998. Family members, close relatives within his tribe, the larger community and local officials have all done him harm, he said.

He first came to Ethiopia in April 2002, subsequently marrying Fatumo Mohamed at the Church of the Nazarene. News of his Christian marriage circulated, preceding him upon his return to Hargeisa; soon after his arrival, he said, Muslim fanatics kidnapped his wife and demolished his house.

Fatumo Mohamed remained captive for several months, later managing to escape and rejoin her husband. For more than three years, as they were displaced from the community and went into hiding, he faced open and official threats. When life became unbearably dangerous, they decided to flee to Ethiopia in August 2005.

Speaking only in general terms to protect loved ones he left behind, Ali said Somaliland authorities were seeking him for reasons related to his Christian faith; other sources confirmed this.

Even after he arrived in Ethiopia, Ali was sought by the Somaliland government, which published a notice on April 11,

2007 displaying his photo in two local Somaliland newspapers, Jamhuuriya and Maandeeq. The notice ordered him to appear before a district court within 30 days, saying failure to do so would result in stiff action being taken against him.

That was just one more episode in a journey of faith that began when he broke his leg in 1996. Receiving treatment in Djibouti, he stayed with a close relative who told Ali the New Testament account of Jesus forgiving an adulterous woman brought for judgment. Amazed at Jesus forgiving the woman, Ali began researching Christianity; three years earlier, he had witnessed the stoning of five young women accused of committing adultery in Hargeisa.

“At that point I failed to see the meaning of compassion in Islam,” he said. “Many questions started coming to my mind – that not even a single person in the midst tried to call for compassion for the young ladies. I felt that it could have been even better to kill them with a gun than subjecting them to such inhumane killing.”

Ali, who is seeking asylum and has conveyed his security concerns to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, is struggling to meet the basic needs of the family – food, shelter, education and clothing – and he is facing an urgent health concern. For three years he has been living with a bone infection, he said, and the danger of paralysis is rising. Looking worried and frightened, and that without asylum he could lose his family as well as his life.

“I will continue trusting in God’s protection, for blessed are

those who are persecuted for His sake," he said.