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 Moroccan

authorities deported more than 40 foreign Christian aid workers last week 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.

Photo: Sixteen foster parents from the Village of Hope orphanage were deported last week.

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 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 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 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.”