

Police in Sudan Aid Muslim's Effort to Take Over Church Plot

NAIROBI, Kenya, Oct. 25 (Compass Direct News)—Police in Sudan evicted the staff of a Presbyterian church from its events and office site in Khartoum earlier this month, aiding a Muslim businessman's effort to seize the property.

Christians in Sudan's capital city told Compass that police entered the compound of the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church (SPEC) on Oct. 4 at around 2 p.m. and ordered workers to leave, claiming that the land belonged to Muslim businessman Osman al Tayeb. When asked to show evidence of Al Tayeb's ownership, however, officers failed to produce any documentation, the sources said.

The church had signed a contract with al Tayeb stipulating the terms under which he could attain the property—including providing legal documents such as a construction permit and then obtaining final approval from SPEC—but those terms remained unmet, church officials said.

Church leader Deng Bol said that under terms of the unfulfilled contract, the SPEC would turn the property over to al Tayeb to construct a business center on the site, with the denomination to receive a share of the returns from the commercial enterprise and regain ownership of the plot after 80 years.

"But the investor failed to produce a single document from the concerned authorities" and therefore resorted to police action to secure the property, Bol said.

SPEC leaders had yet to approve the project because of the high risk of permanently losing the property, he said.

"The SPEC feared that they were going to lose the property after 80 years if they accepted the proposed contract," Bol said.

SPEC leaders have undertaken legal action to recover the property, he said. The disputed plot of 2,232 square meters is located in a busy part of the heart of Khartoum, where it has been used for Christian rallies and related activities.

"The plot is registered in the name of the church and should not be sold or transferred for any other activities, only for church-related programs," a church elder who requested anonymity said.

The Rev. Philip Akway, general secretary of the SPEC, told Compass that the government might be annoyed that Christian activities have taken place there for many decades.

"Muslim groups are not happy with the church in north Sudan, therefore they try to cause tension in the church," Akway told Compass.

The policeman leading the officers in the eviction on Oct. 4 verbally threatened to shoot anyone who interfered, Christian sources said.

"We have orders from higher authorities," the policeman shouted at the growing throng of irate Christians.

A Christian association called Living Water had planned an exhibit at the SPEC compound on Oct. 6, but an organization leader arrived to find the place fenced off and deserted except for four policemen at the gate, sources said.

SPEC leaders said Muslims have taken over many other Christian properties through similar ploys.

"We see this as a direct plot against their churches' estates in Sudan," Akway said.

The Rev. John Tau, vice-moderator for SPEC, said the site where Al Tayeb plans to erect three towers was not targeted accidentally.

“The Muslim businessman seems to be targeting strategic places of the church in order to stop the church from reaching Muslims in the North Sudan,” Tau said.

The unnamed elder said church leaders believe the property grab came in anticipation of the proposed north-south division of Sudan. With less than three months until a Jan. 9 referendum on splitting the country according to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005, SPEC leaders have taken a number of measures to guard against what it sees as government interference in church affairs.

Many southern Sudanese Christians fear losing citizenship if south Sudan votes for secession in the forthcoming referendum.

A top Sudanese official has said people in south Sudan will no longer be citizens of the north if their region votes for independence. Information Minister Kamal Obeid told state media last month that south Sudanese will be considered citizens of another state if they choose independence, which led many northern-based southern Sudanese to begin packing.

At the same time, President Omar al-Bashir promised full protection for southern Sudanese and their properties in a recent address. His speech was reinforced by Vice President Ali Osman Taha’s address during a political conference in Juba regarding the signing of a security agreement with First Vice President Salva Kiir Mayardit (also president of the semi-autonomous Government of Southern Sudan), but Obeid’s words have not been forgotten.

Akway of SPEC said it is difficult to know what will become of the property.

“Police continue to guard the compound, and nobody knows for

sure what the coming days will bring,” Akway said. “With just less than three months left for the South to decide its fate, we are forced to see this move as a serious development against the church in Sudan.”