

Algerian Churches Accused of Illegal Operation

Seven Algerian churches face closure this week after the governor of their province sent them written notice that they were operating “illegally.”

The notice on May 22 from Police Chief Ben Salma, citing a May 8 decree from the Bejaia Province governor, also states that all churches “in all parts of the country” will be closed for lack of compliance with registration regulations, but Christian leaders dismissed this assertion as the provincial official does not have nationwide authority.

“All buildings permanently designated for or in the process of being designated for the practice of religious worship other than Muslim will be permanently closed down in all parts of the country, as well as those not having received the conformity authorization from the National Commission,” Salma stated in the notice.

On May 22 the governor of Bejaia sent a statement to the president of the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA) informing him that all churches in the province were illegal because they were unregistered. Registration is required under controversial Ordinance 06-03, but Christians report the government refuses to respond to or grant their applications for registration.

The controversial law was introduced in 2006 to regulate non-Muslim worship. In 2008 the government applied measures in accordance with Ordinance 06-03 to limit the activities of non-Muslim groups, ordering the closure of 26 churches in the Kabylie region because they were not registered. No churches had been closed down since then.

EPA members argue, however, that the law is impossible to

implement as officials refuse to register their churches despite efforts to comply. They said the authorities apply the law when they want to harass churches.

"It's always the same thing," Mustapha Krim, president of the EPA, told Compass. "They use this law when they want to pester us."

On May 23 members of the EPA were scheduled to visit the Minister of Religious Affairs. Instead, however, they were received by one of his deputies, who told them the ministry was not aware of the decision of the Bejaia governor. The meeting was not constructive, according to Krim.

Krim, a resident of Bejaia, sounded relaxed and pragmatic on the phone, but he was adamant that the EPA members had no intention of closing their churches. The letter from the governor did not include a closure date, nor did it give any further reasons local authorities made this decision.

The governor of Bejaia is not particularly religious, according to Krim, making his order to close the churches of his province even more bemusing, he said.

The churches of Bejaia have submitted the documentation the controversial law requires, and the government's unwillingness to give official permission for the churches to operate is a matter for officials, not churches, to resolve, asserted Krim.

"There are no precise reasons given [for the order to close]," Krim said. "They said we have to be in conformity to the law. We've always tried to do this and have submitted all that they requested. Now it's up to them to give us the authorization and do what they need to do."

According to the governor's statement, if the churches do not comply, authorities may use force. The leaders of the churches in Bejaia have decided to conduct church services this weekend as scheduled and "see what happens," said Krim, who also

expects police to show up.

“For now, on Friday and Sunday there will be church meetings like always, but we expect that we may encounter the police,” he said. “They have the authority to intervene.”

He and the leaders of the other Protestant churches of Bejaia will meet on May 26 to discuss a plan in the event of a police presence and force. He said some of the Christians have expressed fear and have many questions.

Asked if he thought this could mean the beginning of more closures of churches across Algeria, Krim said, “It is possible they are capable of doing things like this. We have no intention to close, and we have mobilized people to pray so that God can intervene.”

Despite efforts to comply with the ordinance, no churches or Christian groups have received governmental approval to operate, and the government has not established administrative means to implement the ordinance, according to the U.S. Department of State’s 2010 Report on International Religious Freedom.

Though no churches have closed since 2008, their status remains questionable and only valid through registration with the EPA.

There are more than 99,000 Christians in Algeria, less than 0.3 percent of the total population of 35.4 million people, according to Operation World. Muslims make up more than 97 percent of the population.