

Algerian Court Fines Christian for Proselytizing

International Christian Concern (ICC) has learned that a Christian was given a hefty fine by an appellate court in Tindouf, Algeria, Wednesday for proselytizing. The verdict, viewed by advocates as an “attack” on **religious freedom**, raises concerns about the trial of a second Christian in Oran who may face five years in prison on similar charges.

Mohamed Ibaouène, a Christian convert from Islam, was fined 100,000 Algerian dinars (\$1,280 U.S.) on Feb. 13 for sharing his Christian faith with a former colleague. Abdelkrim Mansouri, a machine operator at the company where Ibaouène held a management position, had filed a complaint against Ibaouène with the National Gendarmerie in Tindouf in February 2012 for allegedly pressuring him to “abandon” Islam. Months later, Ibaouène was sentenced in absentia by a court in Tiztztou to one year in prison and fined 50,000 dinars for the offense on Jul. 4.

“I [had] never been summoned by the police or any other authority—I [had] never been investigated by the police or gendarmerie,” Ibaouene told Morning Star News.

Ibaouène denied the charges, claiming that it was, in fact, Mansouri who had pressured him to renounce Christianity. After appealing the verdict, an appellate court in Tindouf ruled on Feb. 13 that the prison sentence would be overturned, but the fine would be increased. Ibaouène was convicted under Article 11 of Law 03/2006, which mandates a fine up to one million dinars to anyone who “incites, constrains, or utilizes means of seduction tending to convert a Muslim to another religion.”

“I’m shocked and very disappointed by this verdict,” Mohamed Benbelkacem, Ibaouène’s lawyer, told ICC. “The verdict had no

place because there was absolutely no evidence against my client. The judge was presumably pressured by his superiors, which led to the decision to maintain the fine and cancel the prison term. Otherwise, my client would have been acquitted.”

“Ibaouène’s ruling is an attack on freedom,” said Mustapha Krim, the President of the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA). “It is clear that the verdict was unfair and the EPA intends to follow up on the case. As long as the 2006 law exists, there will always be people who wrongly accuse Christians.”

Ibaouène is not the only Christian who has appeared in an Algerian court for proselytism in recent months. Siagh Krimo, arrested in April 2011 and detained for three days for giving a CD about Christianity to a neighbor, was sentenced to five years in prison by a court in Oran in May 2011. Following Krimo’s appeal, an appellate court reopened the case in November 2012 after the trial’s nearly one-year adjournment so that new evidence could be presented. Krimo’s next hearing has been postponed to an unannounced date.

Aidan Clay, ICC regional manager for North Africa, said, “Once again, Algeria’s courts have enforced a law that, by its very nature, is used to prosecute anyone who does not adhere to the religion of Islam. Algeria, a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, has an obligation to protect religious freedom, including the rights of individuals to choose and profess their own faith.

“Yet, Christians continue to be fined on oblique charges despite very little evidence being presented in the courtroom. We urge the Algerian government to repeal legislation introduced in 2006 that makes it nearly impossible for Christians to express their faith openly. Until these laws are abolished, the international community will continue to question Algeria’s commitment to religious freedom and to Article 36 of the country’s constitution, which states that

freedom of creed is inviolable.”