

Amid Christian Persecution, Sudan Government Proclaims Religious Freedom

Sudan's minister of guidance and endowments, Al-Fatih Taj El-sir, announced Wednesday that no new licenses for building churches will be issued. The Ministry of Guidance and Social Endowments oversees religious affairs in the country.

The minister explained this decision by claiming that no new churches had been established since the secession of South Sudan in July 2011, due to a lack of worshippers, and claimed a growth in the number of abandoned church buildings. He added there was therefore no need for new churches but said the freedom to worship is guaranteed in Sudan.

This decision was announced against the backdrop of a campaign of repression against Christians in northern Sudan that began in December and has continued into 2013. Days before this announcement, the Catholic Information Service for Africa reported a senior South Sudanese Catholic priest, Father Maurino, and two expatriate missionaries had been deported on April 12.

The two missionaries, one from France and the other from Egypt, worked with children in Khartoum. According to Fr. Maurino, no reason was given for the deportations. He added that Christians were in trouble in Sudan, since the government sought to Islamize the country and eliminate the Christian presence.

In a briefing published this month, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) states that since December, the organization "has noted an increase in arrests, detentions and deportations of Christians and of those suspected of having links to them, particularly in Khartoum and Omdurman, Sudan's largest cities.

There has also been a systematic targeting of members of African ethnic groups, particularly the Nuba, lending apparent credence to the notion of the resurgence of an official agenda of Islamisation and Arabisation.

“The campaign of repression [has] continued into 2013, with foreign Christians being arrested and deported at short notice and those from Sudan facing arrest, detention and questioning by the security services, as well as the confiscation of property such as mobile phones, identity cards and laptops. In addition to the arrests and deportations, local reports cite a media campaign warning against ‘Christianisation.’”

In February, at least 55 Christians linked to the evangelical church in Khartoum were detained without charge. On Feb. 18, the cultural center of the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church in Khartoum was raided by the National Intelligence and Security Services. Three people were arrested at the premises, and several items were confiscated, including books and media equipment. The three arrested were all from South Sudan; one was released days after the initial arrest.

CSW’s advocacy director, Andrew Johnston, says, “The recent spike in religious repression in Sudan is deeply worrying. The minister’s claims of guaranteeing freedom to worship are at odds with regular reports of Christians being harassed, arrested and, in some cases, expelled from the country at short notice. We urge the Sudanese government to end its campaign of harassment against the Christian community and respect the right of all of its citizens to freedom of religion or belief, as outlined in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Sudan is a signatory.”