

Arrested Evangelists in Tanzania Say Muslims Colluded with Police

Two Christian evangelists in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, have been arrested after Muslims invited them to debate religion but instead called in security agents who charged the evangelists with illegal preaching.

Anglican evangelists Eleutery Kobelo and Cecil Simbaulanga, released on bail and facing a hearing on Feb. 11, told Compass that Christian and Muslim groups organized the inter-faith debate that was planned for a neutral venue in October of last year in the Kariakoo area of Dar es Salaam.

Kobelo said no Muslims showed up at the debate until Islamists arrived with government security agents who charged them with “using religious sermons to incite Muslims and Christians into viewing each other with suspicion.”

“This continuous intimidation by the Muslims using the police is worrying us,” he said.

Kobelo and Simbaulanga were in jail for seven days before they were released on bail on Oct. 27. At press time charges of unlawful assembly had been brought against the two evangelists and seven other Christians, but it was not clear if the original charges of inciting religious suspicions were still in place.

Also arrested and released last October were Christians Joseph Lima, Shadrack Mwasonya, Festo Mumba, Erastus Mwarabu, Joseph Mmari, John Chacha, and Daniel Mwakemwa.

Â Kobelo said he does not foresee a fair hearing on Feb. 11, but that he cannot afford a lawyer.

“Without legal representation, it’s a long shot for justice to be done in this matter,” he said. “It is very difficult for me to raise 500,000 Tanzanian shillings [US\$365] at the moment.”

Kobelo said he was seriously concerned about the charge of illegal assembly, which he said contradicted their rights as citizens; Tanzania’s constitution allows for freedom of religion and assembly.

Several other cases against Christians remain before local courts in Tanzania, he said, some of which have dragged on since 2007. His case will be tried in a court in the Kariakoo area of Dar es Salaam.

“The message we are putting across is that we need prayer and advocacy for the sake of our lives,” Kobelo said.

Simbaulanga told Compass that Muslims have resorted to using state police to harass Christians because they have political power. Tanzanian President Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete is a Muslim.

“We have had tremendous success in our ministry to Muslims, with thousands of Muslims turning to Christ,” Simbaulanga said. “So Muslims are trying to stop the movement, but nobody can stop the gospel.”

Simbaulanga was imprisoned for 62 days between December 2006 and February 2007 in Kigoma, he said. Denied bail, he was accused of trying to convert Muslims to Christ and “abusing Islam” by saying Muhammad had married a young girl. Several cases are pending against him in different courts, he said, and Muslims are constantly searching for him.

“Since 1996 I have always been on the run, trying to save my life,” Simbaulanga said.

He added that a family member who preached mainly among Muslims died in prison in 2005 due to a heart attack as a

direct result of police harassment.

“There is a huge team of very sincere and committed Christians reaching out to Muslims in Tanzania, and we need lots of prayer, fellowship and financial support,” he said.

An estimated 62 percent of Tanzania’s population is Christian and 35 percent is Muslim, mostly Sunni; other religious groups make up the other 3 percent of the population, according to the U.S. Department of State.

Police in the Tanzanian capital of Dodoma stopped two Christian evangelists from reading excerpts from the Quran in an outdoor event on March 18, 2009, according to the state department’s 2009 International Religious Freedom Report.

Officers temporarily detained them and released them with a warning not to read the Quran during sermons to avoid antagonizing the Muslim community.