

Bible School, Church Buildings Attacked in Sudan

Christians faced increased hostilities in Sudan over the past few weeks, culminating in an attack on a Christian compound in Khartoum by a throng of Muslim extremists armed with clubs, iron rods, a bulldozer and fire.

Breaking down the compound wall with a bulldozer, the assailants on April 21 set fire to the Gerief West Bible School and the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church (SPEC) building; they also damaged three other places of worship and other buildings in the same compound, sources told Compass by telephone. Also damaged were a clinic, a home for the elderly, classrooms and living quarters.

"What happened could not be imagined—it was terrible," said the Rev. Yousif Matar, general secretary of the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church synod. "They burned all furniture of the school and the church as well."

Following a fiery call by hard-line Muslim sheikh Muhammad Abdel Kareem on April 20 to a crowd of more than 500 to destroy "the infidels' church," he led the attack the next day, sources said.

"Tomorrow at 8 a.m., Muslims in this area must gather in front of the infidels' church and destroy them," Kareem told the crowd, according to Compass sources.

The next morning, according to Christian support organization Open Doors, authorities held the mob back about a kilometer from the compound, but the assailants dispersed and found their way back early in the afternoon.

"Police at the compound stood back and did nothing to prevent the mob from vandalizing the compound," Open Doors stated in a

press release. "There was no cordon around the Bible school or church, as some have stated in other media reports."

Besides the SPEC church building, the **worship** venues damaged in the attack were halls used by Ethiopian, Indian and ethnic southern Sudan congregations, according to Open Doors. The organization reported that area residents told the *Sudan Tribune* that the assailants were the same ones that had threatened to attack the church, apparently calling for the deportation of southerners in Sudan and terming them "foreigners."

Ethnic southern Sudanese were ordered to register for citizenship this month or be deported following South Sudan's secession last July 9.

Shouting "*Allahu Akbar* [God is greater]" and "No more Christianity from today on—no more church from today on," the attackers stormed the Bible school bookstore and burned Bibles and other literature, sources said. They threatened to kill anyone who resisted them, they said.

All the Bible school's office equipment, library books and students' personal belongings were destroyed by fire, according to Open Doors.

Some students, staff and members of some churches were beaten, according to Philip Akway, a pastor and former general secretary of the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church; SPEC clergyman John Tau's right hand was wounded, while deacon John Bouth sustained a chest injury.

The assailants also burned trees on the property. On April 9, the mob had arrived with a bulldozer and threatened to demolish the Bible school, saying it was located on land that should be returned to "the land of Islam" because southern Sudanese were no longer legal citizens. Police arrived and forced the assailants to withdraw from the school compound, but the Islamists threatened to take the land by force.

At press time **Bible** school students remained scattered, with some of them taking refuge in Christian homes far from the area, while others fled to churches in northern Khartoum, sources said.

Church leaders told Compass they were concerned that such incidents could lead to Muslims in Sudan taking church lands.

Arrests

Other incidents last week indicated that Christianity is not welcome in Sudan, according to Open Doors. Catholic Church personnel working for SudanAid, the church's humanitarian organization, have been arrested in Nyala, in Darfur, and their office has been closed, the organization stated, citing a report from Sudan Catholic Radio Network.

"Church leaders in the area fear that this may escalate," according to the Open Doors statement. "They feel very isolated and vulnerable."

Last week, the organization added, three churches in Khartoum were warned that their buildings would be demolished if they continued services. The three churches were the Episcopal Church of Sudan Baraka Parish Church, the Sudan Interior Church in Dar Es-Salaam outside Khartoum, and a third church in Omdurman, across the Nile River from Khartoum.

Worship Stopped

Previously hostilities against Christians had flared on April 6, when police rushed into a Sudanese Church of Christ compound in Omdurman and forced the congregation to stop worshipping, Christian sources said.

The congregation was preparing for a Good Friday Easter service.

"We told the police officers who were in charge of the force that it was unfair to stop the Christians from worship while Muslims enjoy the same privilege freely without any objection

from the police," a Christian source said.

Police said that it was Friday and therefore only Muslims could **pray**, and that the mosque service must not be interrupted by the "songs and praises of the infidels," a source said.

Usually churches are only barred from using loudspeakers during Islamic Friday prayers in Khartoum. Also, shops are ordered to close during Friday prayers, with those doing business fined, jailed or losing their commercial license.

"You must stop the worship because Friday's Muslim prayers are now starting" police told the worshiping congregation, according to the Rev. Kowa Shamal.

With Christians already complaining about increased discrimination since predominantly non-Muslim South Sudan seceded, church members were greatly discouraged by the shut-down, sources said.

Muslims are favored in Sudanese law and policy, with the notorious Sudanese Public Order Police making sure that *shariah* (Islamic law) is enforced, often without any legal aid for non-Muslim suspects, they said. The country, which President Omar al-Bashir has vowed will become a more strictly Islamic state, plans to prohibit the construction of church buildings, they said.