

Death Threats Spur Libyan Human Rights Official to Flee Country

The head of the Libyan Parliament's Human Rights Committee has resigned and fled to London, saying he's received death threats. Hassan Al Amin, prominent for his long opposition to the Gaddafi regime, recently spoke out against armed gangs and militias in his Misrata area. His self-imposed exile comes as hostilities against Libya's Christian minority, many by armed groups in the east, have increased in recent months.

On March 14, in Benghazi, eastern Libya, as-yet publicly unidentified arsonists set fire to the main Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church. Pictures—notably by Libya's Herald ('The New Independent Libya Daily')—show the windows of the church blackened by smoke. No casualties were reported, but reports say the fire produced more damage inside the two-storey building.

Witnesses of this second targeting of the church in recent weeks said they suspected the arsonists were militia members. On Feb. 28, armed men had attacked Rev. Paula Isaac, a priest of the Coptic Orthodox Church, and his assistant. The Libyan foreign ministry has condemned the attack on church and the aggression towards the cleric and his assistant by 'the irresponsible armed men', AFP news agency reported.

There is growing pressure on the Christian community in a country where more than 97 percent of the 6.5 million inhabitants are Muslims. However, hundreds of thousands of migrant workers come from neighboring countries such as Egypt, many of them Christians from its large Coptic community. Other Christians in Libya are tiny numbers of American, European and other expatriate workers.

The lack of freedom of religion in Libya was notorious under the rule of the late President Muammar Gaddafi. During his 42 years' regime, the situation for Christians was described by human rights groups as extremely harsh. His greatly feared secret police imposed severe restrictions on Christian organizations and their activities. Distribution of Christian literature was banned and evangelism was criminalized.

The fall of Gaddafi's regime, following the 2011 popular uprising, did not bring any significant change. The tiny minority of Christians continue to experience various forms of pressure, mainly from armed groups. In its 2013 report, Human Rights Watch pointed out the failure of Libya's now-governing General National Congress, elected in July 2012, to disband armed groups responsible for numerous abuses across the country.

“Non-Libyans from sub-Saharan Africa, mainly migrant workers, are particularly vulnerable to abuse, facing harassment, arrests, ill-treatment in detention, forced labor and no regulated access to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees”.

Attacks against religious minorities since Gaddafi lost his grip on power started in October 2011, and have intensified.

In the Commonwealth War Cemetery in Benghazi, over 200 graves were damaged in February 2012, reportedly by Salafists.

The Alexandrian Orthodox Church in Tripoli was then attacked on Sept. 16, and the Greek cemetery was vandalized.

In 2013, the Libyan government has re-affirmed its allegiance to Islam. As a security official told Reuters, “Proselytizing is forbidden in Libya. We are a 100 percent Muslim country and this kind of action affects our national security.”

A worker for Christian ministry Open Doors, which monitors Christian persecution, expressed deep concerns about the

deteriorating situation for Christians in Libya.

“Since Muammar Gaddafi’s regime fell two years ago, there have been several reports of violence against Christians, but since February dozens of Christians have been confronted with hostilities, detainment and deportation. Several of them were severely mistreated and one has unfortunately died while in detention,” said the Open Doors worker, whose identity is being withheld to help prevent militia reprisal.

Egyptian Ezzat Hakim Atallah died on March 10 during detention in Tripoli. He had been arrested in February with a number of Christians on suspicion of distributing Christian books or proselytizing. In addition to four Egyptians, there were three non-Arab foreigners – a South African, a Korean and a Swedish American – who had been working and living in Libya for years.

“Ezzat was running a cell-phone repair shop in Benghazi and had been living in Libya for about ten years,” the Open Doors worker said. “People knew he was an Egyptian Copt, so also that he is a Christian, but that never led to serious trouble for him or his family”.

While the non-Arabs are treated comparatively well while being detained, the Egyptians are badly mistreated, local sources report. They say they lack warm clothing and food and have no other option than sleeping on the cold concrete cell floor.

The detained Egyptians were transferred from Benghazi to Tripoli on Feb. 25. Atallah was one of those transferred; reportedly they all were detained in one cell.

During his imprisonment Atallah suffered from severe chest pains. He was moved to a hospital March 6 for treatment, but later was returned and locked up again with the other Egyptian Copts. Atallah died in the cell as his cellmates stood by helplessly.

He leaves a wife, daughter and son, ages 11 and 15. After receiving his body back in Cairo, his family claimed his health was affected by torture.

According to Egyptian news sources, more than 40 Egyptian Copts have been stopped by a militia group in the past weeks. The Copts all had their heads shaven before being deported from Libya. In December, two Copts were reportedly killed in a bomb blast at a church in the Libyan Mediterranean town of Dafniya. Another two priests of an Orthodox and a Catholic Church were attacked.

In early March a gunman took a shot at a priest in the Catholic cathedral in Tripoli. The shot missed and the gunman got away, local sources say.

On March 13 the European Union Delegation expressed concerns about ‘‘the continued detention and the treatment of persons held on alleged charges of proselytism in Libya. The freedom of religion or belief is a universal human right which needs to be protected everywhere and for everyone’’.

The United Nations Support Mission in Libya on March 7 said it was deeply concerned by several recent incidents, including attacks on media organisations, threats against journalists, and violence against a Coptic church and other houses of worship.

‘‘These acts violate fundamental human rights, particularly the freedom of faith and freedom of expression’’. The UNSMIL recommended the Libyan authorities to ensure respect of human rights and accountability for violators.

Libya ranks No. 17 on the 2013 World Watch List, a roster of the 50 countries where living as a Christian is most difficult. The list is updated annually by Open Doors

International.