

Ethiopian Convert Remains Jailed for Handing Out Bibles

✖ A convert from Islam who has led a push for Muslim-Christian understanding in Ethiopia has been in jail for nearly four months since his arrest for “malicious” distribution of Bibles.

Christian sources in Ethiopia said that, contrary to Ethiopian law, 39-year-old Bashir Musa Ahmed has not been formally charged since his arrest on May 23 in Jijiga, capital of Somali Region Zone Five, a predominantly Muslim area in eastern Ethiopia. Zonal police arrested him after he was accused of providing Muslims with Somali-language Bibles bearing covers that resemble the Quran, the sources said.

An Ethiopian national, Ahmed is known as a bold preacher of Christianity and is credited with opening discussion of the two faiths between Christian and Muslim leaders. He is well-known in the area as a scholar of Islam, but his case has gone largely unreported in Ethiopia.

A source who requested anonymity said authorities likely are secretly planning to transfer Ahmed from his Jijiga cell to Ghagahbur jail, in part to prevent other Christians from visiting him and in part because he has not been charged.

The source told Compass that Ahmed’s own relatives and tribe instigated the arrest with the intent of stopping him from spreading Christianity in the region, whose 5 million predominantly Muslim inhabitants are mainly of Somali origin.

“The Ethiopian constitution allows for religious tolerance,” said the source, “but to date Ahmed has not been taken to court. He is still in the cell now, going on the fourth month, which is quite unusual for an Ethiopian nationality and the constitutional requirements.”

For providing Bibles with cover pages resembling the Quran, Ahmed is accused of “maliciously” distributing Bibles and trying to convert Muslims to Christianity, although conversion and manifesting one’s faith are not illegal in Ethiopia. At issue is whether the Bibles with covers resembling the Quran violate copyright issues and disrespect Islam.

Christian converts in the area said the kind of Bible that Ahmed distributed is widely available on the market in Ethiopia and is commonly used by Somali Christians inside and outside of the country.

Following a recent visit to Ahmed, the source said he looked strong in faith but seemed to have lost weight and was in need of clothes.

“I am doing fine here in prison, but it is a bit unfortunate that some of my close friends who claimed to advocate and serve the persecuted Christians have not come to see me,” Ahmed told the source. “I am thankful for those who have taken their time to come and see me as well as advocate for my release.”

Sources said hostility toward those spreading faith different from Islam is a common occurrence in Muslim dominated areas of Ethiopia and neighboring countries. Christians are subject to harassment and intimidation, they said, to stem a rising number of Muslim converts.

“In God’s own time I know I will be set free,” Ahmed told the source. “Continue praying for me. I know it is God’s will for me to be here at this time and moment in life.”

Ethiopia’s constitution, laws and policies promote freedom of religion, but occasionally local authorities infringe on this right, according to the U.S. Department of State’s 2008 International Religious Freedom Report. An estimated 40 to 45 percent of Ethiopia’s population belongs to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, evangelical and Pentecostal groups make up an

estimated 10 percent of the population and about 45 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, according to the report.

In Ethiopia's federal state system, each state is autonomous in its administration, and most of those holding government positions in Somali Region Zone Five are Muslims.