

Jailed Evangelists in Ethiopia Win Appeal but Remain in Prison

✖ Two Christians in Ethiopia who had been sentenced to six months of prison on false charges of offering money to people to convert have successfully appealed their sentence, only to be kept in prison on a new charge.

After a lower court in Amhara state threw out their appeal on Sept. 21, the State Supreme Court in Bahir Dar last week ordered Temesgen Alemayehu and Tigist Welde Amanuel to be released after paying a 500 birr (US\$40) fine each, Christian sources said. But the two Ethiopian evangelists are still in prison awaiting the result of a new charge that fellow inmates filed for allegedly insulting the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) while in prison.

Alemayehu and Amanuel, of Wengel Lealem church in Addis Ababa, had gone to Debiretabor, Amhara state in July to help establish a church. On July 22 they appeared at district court in Debiretabor to hear charges against them that they were offering money and gifts to people to change their religion; Christian sources said witnesses falsely testified to that effect.

Members of the EOC produced the false witnesses, the sources said. Alemayehu stated that his only sin was telling of his faith in Christ to interested persons and that he had a constitutional right to do so, but the judge sentenced him and Amanuel to six months of prison.

An appeal they filed at the high court in Debiretabor was thrown out, forcing them to appeal to a higher court (see "Prison Terms Upheld for Two Christians in Ethiopia").

Last week, the sources said, the regional State Supreme Court accepted their appeal, reducing the sentence to the fine and ordering their release after they paid it; the guilty verdict, however, remained.

Yesterday, as the evangelists were appearing before the court in Debiretabor regarding the decision of the Supreme Court in Bahir Dar, a new charge was brought against them, Christian sources said: Inmates had signed a petition asking the district prosecutor to prosecute them for insulting the EOC while in prison.

Church leaders in Debiretabor believe that the charge was orchestrated by EOC members both inside and outside the prison.

The judge set Oct. 14 for the two Christians to appear in court to answer to the new charge. At yesterday's hearing the district prosecutor opposed the release of the two evangelists, claiming they would not appear for the next court date. The judge decided to keep them in prison at least until the Oct. 14 hearing.

The maneuver shattered the two Christians' hopes of being released, church leaders said.

"We are asking for the continuation of prayers," said one church leader who requested anonymity for security reasons. "We are thinking of reporting to the State's Supreme Court in Bahir Dar and see what would be the next move."

Church leaders in Debiretabor said the condition of the imprisoned Christians is worsening. Alemayehu was said to be suffering from kidney infections and sought permission to get treatment, but prison officials refused.

Debiretabor is the seat for the south Gondar Zone administration in Amhara state. As in the rest of Amhara, Debiretabor's population is predominantly EOC with hostile

attitudes towards evangelicals.

The two Christians' arrests stemmed from a July 19 incident in which passersby began to question them as they were preaching on a roadside. Christian sources said a heated argument led to a group attack on the two evangelists, wounding Alemayehu. Amanuel sustained minor injuries, the sources said.

Christian sources said a group within the EOC called "Mahibere Kidusan" ("Fellowship of Saints") had incited members to attack the two evangelists as they were proclaiming Christ. The increasingly powerful group's purpose is to counter all reform movements within the EOC and shield the denomination from outside threats.

In some cases, the sources said, EOC priests have urged attacks against Christians, and government authorities influenced by Mahibere Kidusan have infringed on Christians' rights.