

Killings in S. Kordofan Cast Shadow over Christians in Sudan

Failure by the Sudanese Armed Forces and allied Islamic militia to distinguish between combatants and civilians in territorial battles in South Kordofan state is due in part to a desire to rid the area of Christianity, local Christians say.

A Christian in the Leri East area of Kadugli who escaped SAF Intelligence agents 18 days after his June 20 arrest from his home said he saw six other Christian detainees taken away, one by one, to be executed over the course of two weeks.

“They were insulting us, saying that this land is an Islamic land and that we were not allowed to be in this land,” he told Compass. “I saw them take my fellow Christians brothers and shoot them in the forest near the place where we were detained.”

While the SAF and its paramilitary allies have targeted members and supporters of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement forces, the Christian, who requested anonymity as he is still in hiding, said he was detained simply because he was a Christian. A convert from Islam 10 years ago, he said he was scheduled to be executed the day he escaped.

“I was already dead, so I did not fear being shot dead – I was not worried about my safety any more; after all, I was under their mercy as they thought, but God was in control,” he said.

A former aid worker with a Christian humanitarian agency, he said he was praying throughout the ordeal.

“I was praying despite the fact they were threatening me that

I would face the same fate of the six brothers who were shot dead in the forest," he said.

After the miracle of being able to escape during a lull in their vigil, God rescued him from other potential dangers in his trek to freedom, he said.

"I was interrogated three times at three different checkpoints, but God covered their eyes to keep them from discovering me," he said. "I think God is teaching me that I still have a mission to accomplish; that was why he rescued me from the hand of Muslims."

As do other Christians in the north since South Sudan split from Sudan on July 9, he believes the Islamic government is targeting Christians in an attempt to clear Christianity from South Kordofan – part of a strategy to turn the north into a purely Islamic state.

"This is clearly a planned persecution by the Islamic government," he said. "My life is in great danger, as they are still looking for me. I may be arrested at any time and even killed."

Other Christians who have fled the area say many Christians have been killed and church buildings burned by the SAF and Islamic militias.

Armed conflict in Kadugli broke out between southern and northern militaries on June 6 after northern forces seized Abyei in May.

Assurances Questioned

With reports of military forces targeting Christians and churches in South Kordofan, assurances by a Sudanese official this month that *sharia* (Islamic law) would protect Christians in the north were not warmly received.

At a seminar organized by a Christian support group in

Khartoum on Sept. 20, Azahry al-Tighani Awad el Sayeed, federal minister of Guidance and Religious Endowments, told church leaders that Islamic law would protect the rights of Christians in Sudan. The statement outraged Christians in Sudan, who voiced their concern that sharia – currently only “a source of legislation,” according to the Interim National Constitution – will become the law itself.

Sudan’s laws and policies already favor Islam, and sharia would make citizenship rights dependent on religion, relegating non-Muslims to second-class status with limited privileges and rights, the Christian leaders said.

“I am against the sharia as a Sudanese Christian because it undermines my basic right and it also does not allow us to co-exist,” said one Christian on condition of anonymity.

Church leaders also objected to hostile rhetoric against Christians by Islamic leaders and government officials, sources said. At some Friday mosque services, imams exhort their followers to decline to cooperate with Christians, and in some cases not even greet them because they are “infidels,” they said.

They also objected to government leaders labeling churches as foreign institutions with links to the West.

“Some people think that the church is a foreign institution existing to implement foreign agendas, but the fact is that is totally false and baseless,” said the unnamed Christian.

Bishop Ezekiel Kondo of Episcopal Church of Sudan said that Christians have long faced discrimination, and that the government still denies permits to acquire and build church buildings. He also criticized the ongoing Islamization of school curricula that omits the history of Christian kingdoms from textbooks.