

Mob Violence Erupts After Boy Urinates on Quran

A **Muslim** boy and a Christian boy meet on the outskirts of Dar es Salaam, the capital of Tanzania. As a result of this meeting, the Christian boy was threatened with being beheaded and at least five churches were destroyed.

When the two boys met, the Muslim boy bragged that if someone was to urinate on the Quran, that person would be turned into a snake, a dog or a rat. "The Christian boy [was] interested with this scenario and without giving it a second thought urinated on the Quran," said Bishop Fabian Obeid, the Chairman of the Pastor's Fellowship in Zanzibar.

When the Muslim boy informed his parents, they were appalled and decided to confront the parents of the Christian boy. After discovering that the Christian boy's parents were not home, they decided to report the incident to a nearby mosque. This is when things started to spin out of control.

Days later, a mob of Muslim youths gathered at the mosque after being stirred up at Friday **prayer**. Their intent was to punish the Christian boy for desecrating the Quran. Police were alerted of the situation and the boy was detained for protection against the mob. The mob gathered outside the police station and demanded the boy be released to them "so that he would be punished accordingly." The appropriate punishment for desecrating the Quran in a case like this is, according to ultra-conservative interpretations of Islamic law, being beheaded.

When the police refused to release the boy, the mob began to riot. With their plans of punishing the boy being thwarted, the mob decided to turn their rage on churches and other Christian property in the area. The mob burned down five churches, including the Seven Day Church, the Anglican Church and the **Assemblies of God** Church. Other property belonging to

Christians in the area was also destroyed including a car belonging to the Anglican Church pastor.

As the riots continued, the Evangelical Assemblies of God Church in Tanzania was pulled down. In the following days, unrest in the Muslim community continued, leading to the destruction of more properties across the country and the lives of Christian leaders being threatened.

On Oct. 18, a mob of Muslim protesters carrying clubs, swords and machetes invaded two churches in Zanzibar, an island off Tanzania's east coast, with the intent to harm the church leaders. "We want the head of Bishop Shayo," the mob shouted as they attempted to enter his Roman Catholic church. When they failed to break into the church, the mob moved on to the Anglican church of Rev. Emmanuel Masoud. As the mob attacked the church, breaking windows and hacking at the doors, the mob chanted "We need the head of Masoud!" Again they were unable to break into the church they were assaulting. That is when they began to chant, "We want the heads of all the church pastors in Zanzibar!"

"These chants caused a lot of panic and some pastors, fearing for their lives, fled the island of Zanzibar to the mainland of Tanzania," said Pastor Lucian Mgaywa of the Church of God in Zanzibar. "Thankfully the government intervened and provided security for the pastors in Zanzibar."

Unfortunately, these riots are not the only incidents of Christians and their places of worship being attacked by extremist elements in Tanzania. As of May, 25 churches and convents have been destroyed. This destruction is mostly confined to Zanzibar where the population is 99 percent Muslim and openly hostile to Christians. According to a witness at the scene of a church being destroyed in Zanzibar, "the assailants were shouting, 'Away with the church—we do not want infidels to spoil our community.'"

Extremists in Zanzibar have gone so far as to block the rebuilding of destroyed churches with court injunctions. The government of Zanzibar, which acts semi-autonomous from the mainland, has taken no action to address the incidents of violence that destroyed many of the churches in Zanzibar. To date, no arrests have been made in connection with attacks on churches in Zanzibar, leading many to question whether the local government condones these activities.

The Islamic separatist group UAMSHO seems to be at the center of many instances of violence against Christians. UAMSHO—a Swahili acronym for its full name “the Association for the Islamic Mobilization and Propagation”—is a religious political group that has called for the separation of Zanzibar from mainland Tanzania. In recent years, UAMSHO has become increasingly fundamental in its religious convictions and has been involved in several attacks on Christians in Zanzibar. After the Evangelical Assemblies of God Church was destroyed, “a flag belonging to UAMSHO was raised over the ruins of the church,” said Bishop Fabian Obeid, Chairman of the Pastor’s Fellowship in Zanzibar.

The increased level of **Islamic fundamentalism** in Tanzania coincides with an increase of Christian persecution throughout East Africa. Even in countries like Kenya, which is 80 percent Christian, Islamic extremist groups like al-Shabaab are beginning to take root and perpetrate more acts of violence against Christians. These extremist groups often use incidents like the boy desecrating the Quran to stir up tensions in Muslim communities that have lived in peace for generations with their Christian neighbors. The government of Zanzibar must take a stand against these attacks and hold these groups accountable for their actions. Until they do, thousands of Christians in East Africa will continue to live in fear.