

Murder of Christian Pastors Evidence of a Broader Issue in East Africa

The pastor of an Assemblies of God church in Tanzania was killed when intervening in an attack by Muslim youth against Christian butchers on Feb. 11. The murder came days after two Somali pastors were killed in Kenya by armed men believed to be sympathizers of al-Shabaab, an al-Qaida-linked Somali terrorist network. These killings are evidence of a trend (largely ignored by mainstream media) of rising persecution of Christians in East Africa.

Pastors Targeted in Tanzania

The attack in Kenya was only the beginning of a two-week stretch of violence against pastors in East Africa. Longstanding tensions between Muslims and Christians in Buseresere, a town in Tanzania's northwestern Geita region, flared on Feb. 11 after a cleric demanded the closure of Christian butcheries in the area.

Pastor Mathayo Kachili of the Tanzania Assemblies of God Church (TAG) was killed while trying to intervene in an attack by Muslim youths against Christian butchers. "A group of Muslim youths, armed with machetes, big clubs, knives and sticks assaulted the Christians [butchers] and seriously beat them," ICC's source in Tanzania said.

"When the Muslims saw [Pastor Kachili] they brutally attacked him," witnesses said. Pastor Kachili died on the scene as a result of this attack.

Six days later, Father Evarist Mushi, a Catholic priest, was murdered on the island of Zanzibar off Tanzania's east coast when two men, presumed to be Muslim extremists, confronted him at the entrance of his church. "One of the attackers shot him in the head," said police spokesman Mohammed Mhina.

The Vatican's Fides news agency reported that a threatening text message was received by local bishops and priests after the shooting. The text read, "We thank our young men, trained in Somalia, for killing an infidel. Many more will die. We will burn homes and churches. We have not finished: at Easter, be prepared for disaster." The text message was signed by an extremist group calling itself the 'Muslim Renewal.'

Pastor Murdered in the Marketplace

On Feb. 7, two pastors working with the Somali communities in Garissa, Kenya were attacked by Islamic extremists suspected to be sympathizers of the extremist group al-Shabaab. Pastor Abdi Welli and Pastor Ibrahim Makunyi were shot while driving through the city's main market, killing Pastor Welli on the scene and severely wounding Pastor Makunyi.

Both Pastor Welli and Pastor Mankunyi received threats on multiple occasions because of their work with the Somali community in Garissa; Pastor Welli had been forced to flee Garissa on several occasions for months at a time. Being a Muslim-background believer (MBB) himself, his conversion and work with the Somali community set him apart as a prime target for al-Shabaab sympathizers active in Garissa. Al-Shabaab believes that all Somalis are Muslim by default. Converting from Islam to another religion is considered a capital offense under the group's interpretation of apostasy, so anything or anyone involved in proselytizing a religion besides Islam to Somalis is dealt with harshly.

The Broader Issue

Are these isolated events or symptoms of a larger issue? The fact that these attacks are happening with greater frequency in countries where Christian persecution has historically been a non-issue should lead to an investigation of the underlying causes.

Without investigation, attacks against Christians in East Africa will likely continue to grow in both frequency and

intensity. Decisive action must be taken before the level of Christian persecution reaches the same severity as Nigeria, Sudan and Mali.

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