

Muslims Steal Christians' Land in Zanzibar Island

Authorities of predominantly Islamic Zanzibar island chain decline to act. Influential Muslims on this East African island have begun building what appears to be a hotel on a 100-year-old burial site owned by an Anglican church, Christian leaders said.

Church leaders with ownership papers for the land told Compass they are disturbed that authorities have taken no action since they filed a police complaint in December about the seizure of the burial site three kilometers (nearly two miles) from Zanzibar city's airport. Tanzania's Zanzibar Archipelago, including the largest island of Zanzibar (officially known as Unguja), is 99.9 percent Muslim.

"We see that the government is partisan and would not like to see the church grow in Zanzibar," the Rev. Canon Emmanuel John Masoud told Compass. "The retired Chief Justice Augustino Ramadani, who is a member of the Anglican church, was appointed to be a link between the church and the government to facilitate the negotiation process, but it seems that nothing is bearing fruits. Hence the church is not supported in any way."

Masoud led church members from nearby Mbueni to the site to offer prayers on Dec. 29, 2010, two days after the daughter of former Zanzibar President Amani Abeid Karume placed boundary markers and a metal storage container full of belongings on the land, indicating the take-over. Karume, who erected a fence on the property to indicate it was now included in his residential area, is the vice chairman of the Chama Cha Mapinduzi, a political party of which Tanzanian President Jakaya Kikwete is chairman.

After the prayers, the Christians removed the boundary markers, and church leaders reported the attempted seizure to the Mazizini police station, Masoud said. They also drew attention to the case to Second Vice-President Seif Ali Iddi. Church leaders said they were promised that the government would take steps to resolve the issue and that the rights of the church were protected, but construction on the site that began at the beginning of the year continues after seven months, Masoud said.

“It has been even very difficult for us to visit the site, because it is always under police guard,” he said. “It is alleged that this upcoming building is intended to be a hotel or a swimming pool.”

The church had planned to continue using the two-acre site as a Christian burial ground or build a Christian school as a memorial to those buried there, collecting the bones and burying them in one place, he said.

“It is quite uncalled for to see the government using force to take away the church’s premises,” Masoud said. “Freedom of worship given in Chapter 3 of the constitution seems not to apply here in Zanzibar.”

The church will continue to raise its voice in spite of the hostile environment, he said.

“We are very concerned about the state of the church,” Masoud said. “It is being subjected to various hardships. I am losing faith in our government. There is open discrimination. They are not serious in obeying the constitution, which safeguards people’s rights as well as the established institutions, like churches.”

Seizure in Pemba

Near the city of Wete in Pemba, the archipelago’s second largest island, authorities refused to help Christians who also suffered the seizure of their land at the hands of

Muslims, church leaders said.

Wete's Anglican church purchased a burial site worth 1 million Tanzanian shillings (\$630) in 2007 in Finya village, about five kilometers (nearly three miles) from Wete, but in November 2010 the Rev. Stephen Aaron Kamwendo received word that an unnamed Muslim forestry worker had begun planting trees on the site as a boundary marker and claim of ownership.

The forestry worker had unofficial backing from the island government, which supports opposition to Christian activity, Kamwendo said. He told Compass that rumors were flying that the church—which had lost its property in Wete after local officials decided to build on it—was planning to relocate to the two-acre property in Finya, prompting the Muslims to plan the takeover.

Kamwendo, who has ownership papers for the land, reported the case to the authorities in Wete and was told that the unnamed forestry worker had been given permission to buy the site. Officials told him that if he would be patient, they would resolve the conflict.

The church leader has also brought the matter to the attention of the president of Zanzibar, he said, but to date no action has been taken.

"We are being cheated like some children," Kamwendo said. "Our rights are not respected. We see no commitment from the government. We shall continue demanding our constitutional rights, which are provided by the 1984 constitution and revised in 1995, which gives freedom of expression and freedom to change one's religion as a personal choice and to share one's faith freely."

He added that there are many cases in Pemba of Muslims deciding to sell their land to Christians, only to face opposition from family members who threaten to call down curses on them.

"It is sad that Christians are not represented as far as their religious rights are concerned," Kamwenda said. "Instead, all religious issues in Zanzibar are channeled through a Muslim mufti. We feel that our rights will not be presented, because the church is not represented."

His church was originally located in the central business area of Wete near a police station, but city planners decided to build a road through the property in 1989. By 1993, the church was forced to relocate its worship site to the present burial site, where the buildings erected are cracking because the ground there is still loose and unstable, he said.

The relocation of the church worship site resulted in the loss of a burial place for its members, prompting the Finya purchase. Kamwenda said church leaders had no choice but to relocate to their burial place, as it is difficult to get government officials to grant land for church purposes, and Muslims refuse to rent property for churches or even sell land to Christians, he said.

Pemba has a population of about 500,000, and Zanzibar island's population is estimated at 700,000. There are only 60 Christian congregations on the archipelago, according to *Operation World*.

Zanzibar is the informal designation for the island of Unguja in the Indian Ocean. The Zanzibar archipelago united with Tanganyika to form the present day Tanzania in 1964.

Muslim traders from the Persian Gulf had settled in the region early in the 10th century after monsoon winds propelled them through the Gulf of Aden. The 1964 merger left island Muslims uneasy about Christianity, seeing it as a means by which mainland Tanzania might dominate them, and tensions have persisted.