

Sharing Christian Faith Gets Algerian Five-Year Prison Sentence

Accusers who say an Algerian Christian **insulted Islam** provided no evidence to a judge hearing the Christian's appeal of his original sentence.

Karim Siaghi, a convert to Christianity, was sentenced in May 2011 to five years in prison and fined 200,000 Algerian Dinars, or about U.S. \$2,500, even though prosecutors had brought no evidence or witnesses before the court.

More than a year later, in mid-November, Siaghi's appeal hearing was held in the coastal city of Oran, in the northwest of Algeria. It was the first time he had faced his accuser in court.

Authorities arrested Siaghi in April 2011 after he purportedly gave a CD about Christianity to a Muslim. Siaghi had gone to a phone shop to buy airtime minutes for his mobile phone, and the merchant there initiated a conversation on religion. Unhappy with Siaghi's non-Muslim answers, the merchant tried to force him to pay homage to the Prophet and to recite the Muslim shahada: "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet."

When Siaghi refused and said he was a Christian, the merchant filed a complaint that the convert had belittled the Prophet, and in the absence of further witnesses, charges were brought against him.

The merchant was said to have seen Siaghi give a CD to someone, but never appeared in court to testify to that

effect. Siaghi's lawyer said there was no evidence of the charges against the Christian.

Local Algerians as well as international observers expressed dismay when the judge handed down the sentence. The prosecutor reportedly had sought a two-year sentence and a fine of 50,000 Algerian dinars, or about US \$690.

Experts on Algeria's treatment of Christians say that Algerian courts customarily have preferred to delay deciding in favor of Christians, so as not to aggravate local Muslim sentiments. They say judges also have been slow to pronounce final verdicts in order to keep from provoking international criticism over **religious freedom**.

According to online news source Liberation Algerie, the judge demanded the November hearing to complete any information missing from the case, and to allow the court confirm whether the accusations merited the given sentence.

Siaghi "categorically denied, once more, having pronounced the least insult against the Prophet," according to Liberation Algerie, to the satisfaction of his defense lawyer. Siaghi was accompanied by his wife and young daughter.

The judge has not yet fixed a date for the next court hearing, when a ruling is expected to be issued. Protesters who gathered in front of the Criminal Court of Oran on the day of the hearing, however, expressed concern that Siaghi may face another drawn-out legal ordeal, according to Algerian daily L'Expression.

Mustapha Krim, president of the Protestant Church of Algeria, said he hopes during Siaghi's next hearing to mobilize Algerians in protest.

"We are planning on mobilizing the maximum amount of people,

Christian or not, to protest the arbitrary character of Law 06-03 of 2006, which in effect allows a person who does not share the values of 'certain Islamists' to be condemned based on word of mouth," Krim said.

Law 06-03 outlaws **proselytism of Muslims**, as well as the distribution, production and storing of material used for the purpose. It is often cited in court cases against Christians. The law also prohibits churches from operating without registration.

In 2010 four Christian leaders in Tizi Ouzou were sentenced to several months in jail for worshipping without a permit, but the jail time was suspended. In 2008 a Christian leader in Tiaret, Rachid Essaghir, received suspended sentences in two separate cases against him for sharing his faith. Though Christians appeal these verdicts, the outcome rarely is conclusive.

In recent years many Algerians have converted to Christianity, partly because of **Christian TV** broadcasting in the country. Backlash is common.

Last month a man was beaten into a coma by his cousin for watching Christian TV programs. His name and location have been withheld for his security. A Protestant church in Ouargla, in southern Algeria, was attacked in February resulting in damage to the exterior of the building. In October, four people threatened to burn down the church building.

In a historic move, the Algerian government in the summer of 2011 officially recognized the Protestant Church of Algeria, authorizing it to act as the council of the country's Protestant churches. The church was established in 1972, though until 2011 only the Catholic Church had government recognition. Despite the recognition of the **Protestant Church**

of Algeria, churches still are required to obtain their own registration.

Algeria was ranked 23rd in the 2012 World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian. The list cited increasing pressure on Christians, including discrimination by the state and family members. The World Watch List said Islamist groups are becoming more active in their pursuits to influence government and are monitoring the activities of Christians.