

# Sudan Threatens to Arrest Church Leaders

Sudan's Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowments has threatened to arrest church leaders if they carry out evangelistic activities and do not comply with an order for churches to provide their names and contact information, Christian sources said.

The warning in a Jan. 3 letter to church leaders of the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church (SPEC) arrived a few days after Sudan President Omar al-Bashir told cheering crowds on Jan. 3 that, following the secession of largely non-Islamic south Sudan last July, the country's constitution will be more deeply entrenched in shariah (**Islamic law**).

"We will take legal procedures against pastors who are involved in preaching or evangelistic activities," Hamid Yousif Adam, undersecretary of the Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowment, wrote to the church leaders. "We have all legal rights to take them to court."

Sources said the order was aimed at **oppressing Christians** amid growing hostilities toward Christianity.

"This is a critical situation faced by our church in Sudan," said the Rev. Yousif Matar, secretary general of the SPEC.

Another church leader said the order was another in a series of measures by the government to control churches.

"They do not want pastors from South Sudan to carry on any church activities or **mission work** in Sudan," he said.

Sudanese law prohibits missionaries from evangelizing, and **converting from Islam** to another religion is punishable by imprisonment or death in Sudan, though previously such laws

were not strictly enforced. The government has never carried out a death sentence for apostasy, according to the U.S. State Department's latest International Religious Freedom Report.

Christians are facing growing threats from both Muslim communities and Islamist government officials who have long wanted to rid Sudan of Christianity, Christian leaders told Compass. They said Christianity is now regarded as a foreign religion following the departure of 350,000 people, most of them Christians, to South Sudan following the July 9, 2011 secession.

Sudan's Interim National Constitution (INC) holds up shariah as a source of legislation, and the laws and policies of the government favor Islam, according to the state department report. Christian leaders said they fear the government is tightening controls on churches in Sudan and planning to force compliance with Islamic law as part of a strategy to eliminate Christianity.

As he has several times in the past year, Al-Bashir on Jan. 3 once again warned that Sudan's constitution will be more firmly entrenched in shariah.

"We are an Islamic nation with shariah as the basis of our constitution," he told crowds in Kosti, south of Khartoum. "We will base our constitution on **Islamic laws.**"

His government subsequently issued the decree ordering church leaders to provide names and contact information of church leaders in Sudan, sources said. Christian leaders said the government is retaliating for churches' perceived pro-West position.

Muslim scholars have urged heavy-handed measures against Christians to Al-Bashir, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity in Darfur.

## **Hostilities**

Christians in (north) Sudan celebrated last Christmas amid several threats from officials in Khartoum, and some followers of Christ were arrested for their faith, sources said.

Yasir Musa of the Sudanese Church of Christ (SCOC) was arrested along with two other church members by national security agents in Khartoum on Dec. 23; they were detained because they were Christians and therefore suspected supporters of southern military forces. Released shortly afterward, they said authorities threatened to arrest them again if they did not comply with orders not to carry out Christian activities in the Islamic nation.

SCOC leaders said they have complained to the Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowments and were told that the three were arrested for security reasons.

In another case, sources said that Islamic militias loyal to the government in civilian uniform abducted a church leader and two church members as they were returning from a worship service and demanded \$1,000 in ransom. They were released after two days, according to Christian sources in Khartoum.

Christians in Khartoum increasingly fear arrests by militias loyal to the Islamic government, the sources said.

Security agencies in Khartoum have also ordered local Christians not to organize Bible exhibitions, as some churches have done annually, the sources said.

The pressures on Christians come as war in Sudan's South Kordofan state has led leaders there and in North Kordofan to incite hatred against Christians, with officials in both states calling for holy war against the predominantly Christian Nuba people.