

Sudanese Authorities Close Christian Offices in South Darfur

Security agents in Sudan's South Darfur state have closed down the Nyala offices of the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC) and relief group Sudan Aid, sources said.

Agents from the Sudanese National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) arrived at the organizations' compound in Nyala at 8 a.m. on April 22, ordered SCC staff members to hand over keys of offices and vehicles and, without explanation, ordered them to leave immediately, an SCC staff worker said.

"They came early in the morning to our office and took all the keys of the offices, chasing us out of the compound with no reason given to us," the SCC staff worker told Compass by phone.

Three staff members from Sudan Aid were arrested in the course of the closure and were taken to an undisclosed location, the source said.

"Their families are living in agony due to the uncertainty of their fate," the worker said.

NISS agents also closed down a church clinic that was serving the needy in the area.

The actions came as Christianity is increasingly regarded as a foreign faith to be excised from Sudan, which has begun transporting ethnic South Sudanese to South Sudan following the latter's secession last year. An estimated 350,000 ethnic South Sudanese, many of them Christian, remain in the Islamic north, with many having never lived anywhere else.

The day after the closure of the SCC and Sudan Aid offices,

staff members reported to work only to find more than a dozen security personnel, some carrying arms, cordoning off the compound. The security agents told the employees the offices were closed and to go home.

The agents took the keys of five cars and drove them away, according to an SCC press statement. Three motorbikes were also taken.

“We do not know the whereabouts of the cars,” the SCC officials say in the statement.

On April 24, Sudan’s federal Humanitarian Aid Commission froze the bank accounts of the SCC in Nyala.

The security agents also took four cars and five motorbikes from Sudan Aid, sources said. Five staff members were arrested, though two were later released.

Sources told Compass the incident left churches in South Darfur, one of five states that makes up the Darfur region, deeply disturbed and frightened.

Nuba Crisis

At the same time, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, sought by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity in Darfur, has vowed to rid the Nuba Mountains of Christians and those he claims are agents of the West.

On April 20 he ordered the Sudanese military to rid South Kordofan state’s Nuba Mountains of everyone who opposes his Islamic rule, and the past several weeks he has repeatedly declared jihad against the ethnic Nuba peoples, which include many Christians.

The government has declared jihad against Christians in the Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile state and in South Sudan. State-owned TV and radio play songs urging Muslims to “fight the infidels” and “cleanse the land” of their presence, increasing

the fears of ethnic South Sudanese Christians trapped in the hostile north.

Humanitarian agencies consider the Islamic government's targeting of civilians in the Nuba Mountains an "ethnic cleansing" against non-Arab peoples in the multi-ethnic state, with the added incentive of ridding the area of Christians. Additionally, as military conflict escalated between Sudan and South Sudan last month, Bashir vowed to liberate South Sudan from what he described as "insects."

"We do want to see these insects making our pure land unclean," he said to cheers in Port Sudan on April 20.

The hostile speeches by Bashir and other Sudanese officials are aimed at mobilizing Muslims abroad to fund military operations in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states, sources said. Muslim religious leaders in Sudan, said to have ties with hard-line Muslim Salafists, have asserted that there should no longer be room for churches and Christians following South Sudan's secession on July 9, 2011.

Sudanese aerial forces bombed a Sudanese Church of Christ building on March 28 in the al-Buram area of South Kordofan state, eyewitnesses from the area told Compass by phone. The sources added that life is becoming more difficult for Christians in South Kordofan as the Sudan government mobilizes Arab tribes, arming them with guns to kill the ethnic Nuba people.