

Suspected Islamists Torch Ethiopian Homes

A Christian near Ethiopia's southern town of Moyale said suspected Islamic extremists on March 29 burned down his two thatched-grass homes.

Evangelist Wako Hanake of the Mekane Yesus Church told Compass he had been receiving anonymous messages warning him to stop converting Muslims to Christ. The Muslims who became Christians included several children.

"Inside the house were iron sheets and timber stored in preparation for putting up a permanent house," said Hanake, who is in his late 30s. "I have lost everything."

The incident in Tuka, five kilometers (nearly three miles) from Moyale in southern Ethiopia's Oromia Region, happened while Hanake was away on an evangelistic trip. A neighbor said he and others rescued Hanake's wife and children ages 8, 6 and 2.

"We had to rescue the wife with her three children who were inside one of the houses that the fire was already beginning to burn," said the neighbor, who requested anonymity.

Church leaders said neighbors are still housing Hanake and his family.

"The family has lost everything, and they feel fearful for their lives," said a local church leader. "We are doing all we can to provide clothing and food to them. We are appealing to all well wishers to support Hanake's family."

Hanake said he has reported the case to Moyale police.

"I hope the culprits will be found," he said.

An area church leader who requested anonymity told Compass that Christians in Moyale are concerned that those in Tuka are especially vulnerable to a harsh environment in which religious rights are routinely violated.

"The Ethiopian constitution allows for religious tolerance," said another area church leader, also under condition of anonymity, "but we are concerned that such ugly incidents like this might go unpunished. To date no action has been taken."

Tuka village, on Ethiopia's border with Kenya, is populated mainly by ethnic Oromo who are predominantly Muslim. The area Muslims restrict the preaching of non-Muslim faiths, in spite of provisions for religious freedom in Ethiopia's constitution.

Hostility toward those spreading faiths different from Islam is a common occurrence in predominantly Muslim areas of Ethiopia and neighboring countries, area Christians said, adding that they are often subject to harassment and intimidation.

Ethiopia's constitution, laws and policies generally respect freedom of religion, but occasionally some local authorities infringe on this right, according to the U.S. Department of State's 2010 International Religious Freedom Report.

According to Operation World, nearly 40 percent of Ethiopia's population affiliates with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 19 percent are evangelical and Pentecostal and 34 percent are Sunni Muslim. The remainder are Catholic (3 percent) and ethno-religious (3.7 percent).

In Jimma Zone in the country's southwest, where thousands of Christians in and around Asendabo have been displaced as a result of attacks that began on March 2 after Muslims accused a Christian of desecrating the Quran, the number of churches burned has reached 71, and two people have reportedly been killed. Their identities, however, were still unconfirmed.

When the anti-Christian violence of thousands of Muslims subsided by the end of March, 30 homes had reportedly been destroyed and as many as 10,000 Christians may have been displaced from Asendabo, Chiltie, Gilgel Gibe, Gibe, Nada, Dimtu, Uragay, Busa and Koticha.