

Two Catholic Priests Kidnapped in Sudan

South Sudanese militia loyal to Sudan's **Islamic government** have kidnapped two Catholic priests in Rabak, Christian sources said.

A large truck smashed through the gates of the St. Josephine Bakhita's Catholic Church compound in Rabak, 260 kilometers (162 miles) south of Khartoum, on Jan. 15 at 10 p.m., and the assailants broke down the rectory door, the sources said. The Rev. Joseph Makwey and the Rev. Sylvester Mogga were kidnapped at gunpoint.

Four days later, on Jan. 19, the kidnappers forced the two priests to call their bishop with a ransom demand of 500,000 Sudanese pounds (US\$185,530), 250,000 Sudanese pounds each.

Auxiliary Bishop Daniel Adwok told Compass by phone that there was no direct communication between the bishop and the kidnappers, though the priests managed to convey that they were being mistreated.

"We are worried about the two priests," he said. "They are not treating them well."

The kidnappers have attempted no communication with church leaders since then, Adwok said. Neither Makwey, in his 40s, nor Mogga, in his mid-30s, are supporters of southern Sudan military forces in territorial conflict with Sudan over border areas, he added.

Eyewitnesses told Compass that they saw the assailants severely beating the priests while abducting them. The kidnappers also looted the priests' living quarters, stealing two vehicles, two laptops and a safe.

The incident caused panic and terror among Christians in Rabak, with church leaders saying they fear for their lives as they become targets of the Islamic government and its allied militias.

Sudan has seen a steep increase in **persecution against Christians**, according to an annual ranking by Christian support organization Open Doors. Sudan—where northern Christians experienced greater vulnerability after southern Sudan seceded in a July referendum, and where Christians were targeted amid isolated military conflicts – jumped 19 places last year from its 2010 ranking, from 35th to 16th, according to Open Doors' 2012 World Watch List.

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 holds up shariah (**Islamic law**) 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, Sudanese President

Omar al-Bashir on Jan. 3 once again warned that Sudan's constitution will be more firmly entrenched in sharia.

"We are an Islamic nation with sharia 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 a 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.