

Wrongful Conviction in Ethiopia Robs Christian of Children

His wife died shortly before he was falsely accused of desecrating the Quran, and by the time he was released from prison in southern Ethiopia, his two children, ages 6 and 15, were missing.

Tamirat Woldegorgis walked out of prison in Jijiga on April 25, limping, after spending nearly two years in custody, including months in a small cell with 50 other inmates that left one leg paralyzed.

“I have been trying to locate my children, but all in vain,” Woldegorgis told Compass. “My life is ruined—I have lost my house, my children, my health. I am now homeless, and I am limping.”

Muslims in his native Hagarmariam village may have taken his children to further discourage him from having any influence in the area, said Woldegorgis, now staying with a friend in an undisclosed town. A member of the **Full Gospel Church**, Woldegorgis was arrested in August 2010 after a Muslim co-worker in the clothes-making business the two operated out of a rented home discovered he had inscribed “Jesus is Lord” on some cloth, area Christians said.

His business partner later accused him of writing “Jesus is Lord” in a copy of the Quran, although no evidence of that ever surfaced. Angry sheikhs from area mosques had Woldegorgis arrested for desecrating the Quran, though sources said Muslims also accused him of writing “Jesus is Lord” on a piece of wood, on a minibus and then on the wall of a house.

Woldegorgis was sentenced to three years in prison on Nov. 18,

2010, and eventually he was transferred to a prison in Jijiga, capital of Ethiopia's Somali Region Zone Five, which is governed by Islamic principles. In Ethiopia's system of largely autonomous state administrations, most of those holding government positions in Somali Region Zone Five are Muslims. Ethiopia's population is 34.1 percent Muslim and 60.7 percent Christian, according to *Operation World*.

Preaching non-Muslim faiths is not allowed in Zone Five, 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, sources said, with Christians often subject to harassment and intimidation.

While he was in prison, authorities sometimes beat him in efforts to force him to recant his faith and become Muslim, but he refused, he said.

"Life in Jijiga prison was very harsh," Woldegorgis said. "About 50 prisoners were locked in one small room. It was really very congested. Surviving a harsh jail in Jijiga was by the grace of God. Some of the inmates died."

Two days after Woldegorgis was arrested, two friends inquired about him at the Moyale police station; authorities responded by jailing them for two weeks.

Only twice were visitors allowed to see Woldegorgis in prison, he said. A lawyer visited him a few months before his release after serving less than two years of a three-year sentence. His release without being given his official documents – his national ID card and a letter of release – may have indicated official concern about the lack of evidence for his prison term.

When he arrived home, he found that area Muslims had taken over his land and partly demolished his house. There was no

sign of what had happened to his children.

He wrote a letter of complaint to Moyale police about the occupation of his house, but to date no reply has been received.

He began receiving threatening messages soon after his return. "We do not want to see you around here," one read. "You risk losing your life." He fled to a Christian friend's house.

Zamatar Abdi, a Moyale official, was said to have bought the plot where Woldegorgis's house was located, Woldegorgis said. A tailoring machine, 4,000 birr (US\$225 dollars) and all household items have vanished. The partly demolished house is uninhabitable, he said.

His complaints having gone unheeded, on May 7 he made an appeal to federal officials in Addis Ababa, copying a letter to the Moyale head of police, Moyale City Council, Moyale District Magistrate, Federal Government, District Commissioner's Office-Moyale, and the Reconciliation Committee for Zone Four and Zone Five. Moyale, located on Ethiopia's border with Kenya, is divided between the predominantly Muslim Zone Five and Zone Four, which is populated mainly by ethnic Oromo, with each zone having distinct administrative and judiciary systems.