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Ethiopian girls in prison for a book 'countering attacks on Christianity'

World Watch Monitor (16.11.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2kqJqUn> - Three teenage Christian girls yesterday (15 Nov.) appeared in court in Babile, some 550km east of the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa, charged with inciting religious violence.

The girls, whose names were given as Eden, 15, Gifti, 14, and Mihiret, 14 – together with an older girl, named Deborah – were arrested in the mainly Muslim region, following the distribution of a Christian book apparently seeking to counter widely-circulated polemics by a well-known Islamic critic.

In a brief hearing, the judge sentenced all four to one month in prison after asking the prosecutor to present evidence. World Watch Monitor (WWM) learnt that the girls will be transferred to a larger prison in a town called Gelemiso to serve the sentence among common criminals, even though three of them are below the age of 18.

The judge allowed for an appeal but it can only take place after their transfer.

The girls' families are said to be shocked by the verdict but have not decided yet if they will appeal.

Local Muslims said the book was "an insult to Islam", which led to an attack on a church and the arrest of the four teenagers, as reported by WWM on 19 October.

Ethiopia is a mainly Christian country, with areas of significant Muslim presence. According to World Watch List 2016, it ranks 18th of 50 countries in which it is most difficult to live as a Christian.

Previous Story (19 Oct.):

Police have re-arrested an 18-year-old Ethiopian Christian woman only hours after she was released on bail. The woman, known as Deborah, was detained with three younger teenage girls for their part in handing out a book about Christianity in Babile, a town 550km from the capital, Addis Ababa.

Local Muslims said the book was an insult to Islam, and this led to an attack on a church and the arrest of the four teenagers.

It is not yet clear why Deborah was re-arrested. A police investigation failed to bring formal charges against her and the three other girls. Their bail application was approved by a judge, and the four teenagers were released after paying Birr 3,000 (about US\$135).

The prosecutor's office is seeking advice on how to proceed with the case, sources said.

Previous story (11 Oct.):

In Ethiopia, three teenage Christian girls have been arrested following the distribution of a Christian book in the town of Babile, about 550km east of the capital, Addis Ababa. Babile is close to the historic walled city of Harar, also known as the City of Saints, listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site for its Islamic cultural significance.

The three girls - Eden, 15, Gifti, 14, and Mihiret, 14, first appeared in court on 28 September - with an 18-year-old woman known to her friends as Deborah. Police asked for 14 days to further investigate the case, but the judge awarded six days. On 3 October, the girls appeared in court again; the judge awarded officials a further three days to take the girls to a nearby town for medical examinations to determine their exact ages (they don't have official dates of birth, and the age at which Ethiopia deems someone should be tried in an adult court is 18).

The judge postponed the hearing to yesterday (10 October) without giving a reason; the case was then transferred to a higher court in Harar and their lawyers applied for bail.

When the girls came to court in Harar, the prosecutor reportedly asked for more time to finalise his charges, so the judge adjourned until Friday 14 October.

The case follows the distribution of a Christian book (in Ethiopia's main Amharic language) by a local author, 'Let's speak the truth in love: Answers to questions by Ahmed Deedat', that sets out to answer questions posed by the late South African Islamic scholar (and former head of the Islamic Propagation Centre International) about the Christian faith. Local Christians decided to distribute it following cross-cultural evangelism training.

Local Muslims said the book was an insult to Islam and on 19 September a group attacked the Protestant Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) in Babile, damaging its doors and windows. MKC is a member of the Mennonite World Conference.

Town officials quickly arranged a meeting between religious leaders the next day, at which leaders of both the MKC and also the Full Gospel Church (FGC) apparently apologised for the distribution of the book, from which they distanced themselves. Following the meeting, officials arrested a man called Bekele, as well as Deborah, Eden and Eden's mother.

At a wider public meeting the same day, town officials criticised "some elements" who wanted to "incite religious clashes" and warned that they would take further measures against such "instigators". A local Christian who challenged this - by pointing out that Islamic books are in circulation in Babile, but that no similar action is taken - has since been required to report to the police regularly. He has been pressured to apologise for his statements, which he has refused to do.

That night the FGC also suffered an attack, resulting in similar damage to that of the MKC.

Threats against church leaders continued; the next day (21 September), a group of about 20 Muslim youths reportedly visited the house of the MKC leader and warned him to leave the area or risk losing his life and property.

Officials released Eden's mother on 21 Sep. and Bekele on 22 Sep., but arrested Gifti and Mihiret the next day.

There is concern over the wellbeing of the girls; Eden suffered a beating on her first night in prison. But according to WWM's source, who was able to visit the girls in prison and

speak to Eden and Deborah, their faith is unshaken. "This [suffering] is an honour for us. We should expect persecution. We are not afraid. We are singing and praying here in prison," Eden said. Deborah added, "It is an honour to be jailed for God's Kingdom".

Ethiopia says it guarantees freedom of religion* and in the cities there is mostly peaceful co-existence between people of different faiths. However, Evangelical Christians, (including those who formerly adhered to Islam or to the Orthodox Church) face discrimination, threats and sometimes attacks.

Ethiopia is 18th of 50 countries in which it is most difficult to live as a Christian, according to the 2016 World Watch List compiled by Open Doors, which works worldwide with Christians under pressure for their faith.

Villagers attack church compound in Ethiopia

Churchinneed.org (01.03.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1S6kOhf> - A Bishop in Ethiopia has expressed his horror after the Feb. 18, 2016 torching and looting of a Church compound by the very people being helped by priests and women religious.

In a message sent to international Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need, Bishop Abraham Desta described how Gighessa parish—"one of the oldest and biggest parishes of the Vicariate of Meki"—was attacked by "the people for whom, and with whom, we work very closely."

Bishop Desta, the Apostolic Vicar of Meki, described how villagers "including young and old, women and children... started throwing stones and destroying Church properties," including the rectory, diocesan pastoral centre, a small Ursuline convent and a clinic specializing in care for the handicapped.

More than 55 people from around the world attending a conference on nursery education at the pastoral center were whisked to safety, but the sisters stayed behind, refusing to leave patients at their clinic, until eventually they too fled the scene. Having set fire to the rectory, the attackers made off with a year's supply of food, as well as livestock including cows.

Bishop Desta added: "The Ursuline Sisters who run the clinic were left behind with the patients as they were not willing to leave the patients alone, but the people did not spare them." Having demanded that all the clinic's goods be handed over, the mob "began to destroy and to take away everything including the personal clothes in front of the sisters.

The prelate reported: "Sad to say, no one went to help the sisters, but by God's grace they managed to reach Shashamane, the nearest parish, along with the patients and spend that night there. The patients are currently being cared for in Shashamane. "They have lost everything, except the precious gift of life that is being given freely by God almighty," the bishop said.

The bishop expressed his shock that "all this [was] done by the local people whom [the sisters] were serving, whom they know very well - if not all [then] at least a good number of them."

The conference center was looted, the bishop said: The mob "carried away all that belonged to the center, including more than 250 beds, mattresses, some 700 blankets, bed sheets, bed covers, as well as washing machines, televisions, generators, copier

machines, and computers—even the doors and windows of the” building, which was left completely damaged and barren.”

The attackers also seized more 26,455 pounds of food, including wheat, rice, and pasta—the center’s supply for the whole year. Cows and chickens, which were kept on a small piece of land belonging to the parish, were also taken. The only building in the compound that was not attacked was the school.

Bishop Desta concluded: “today there is a question in our hearts and minds. Why Lord? Why like this? I hope that in due time the Lord will give us an answer.”

IRCE condemns recent attack on places of worship

All Africa (24.02.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1TAslZX> - These destructive acts of a few groups of people do not represent the people in the areas where such atrocities occurred. Such actions are strongly forbidden by all religious teachings and doctrines.

The Inter Religious Council of Ethiopia (IRCE) denounced the recent attack on and burning of churches and places of worship in some areas of the country.

In a joint press conference held here yesterday, top leaders of the six-member religious institutions of the Council said that last week, besides the loss of precious human lives, churches and property of churches have been burnt down and destroyed in some areas of West Arsi Zone of Oromia State.

They also noted that similar atrocious activities have occurred in some areas of Gambella and Amhara States as well affecting the peaceful spiritual atmosphere.

According to the Council, these destructive acts of a few group of people do not represent the people in the areas where such atrocities occurred. Such actions are strongly forbidden by all religious teachings and doctrines, the Council added.

In their eight-point statement, the religious leaders also emphasized that the age-old history, value and culture of religious tolerance, and respect in the country need to be upheld.

They also urged the government and the people, particularly the youth in the areas to work together to ensure tranquility in the areas. Religious leaders in those areas should also play a key role in the bringing about spiritual and psychological tranquility among the faithful.

Leaders of all religions and their followers also have to work together for the peace, stability and prosperity of the nation by resolving such destructive tendencies jointly and through engaging in prayers. They also urged local and international media to report the truth without exaggeration.
