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Ethiopians don't have to pay for church they didn't destroy

World Watch Monitor (03.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2pXHptO>

UPDATE [3 May 2017] – Three Ethiopians do not now have to pay compensation for a church which, in January, they were acquitted of charges of destroying.

Tibebu Mekuria, Dawit Jemberu, and Belete Tilahun were freed on 18 January after a Supreme Court judge acquitted them on 13 January.

The three had been falsely convicted and imprisoned for burning down an Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) building. Although witnesses said the men were not near the building at the time of the fire and the single prosecution witness gave inconsistent testimony, a judge found all three guilty on 28 October, 2014, with sentences of up to nine years in prison each.

They were finally acquitted after almost three years of delays, but have only now been released from a separate court order made in July 2016 to pay for damages to the church.

Sources in Ethiopia report that the court yesterday, May 2, dropped the compensation charges, cancelling the government's hold on Tilahun's property and bank account. "All three are extremely relieved over this outcome", World Watch Monitor was told.

PREVIOUS REPORT [2 February 2017]

Three men, falsely convicted and imprisoned for burning down an Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) building in the rural community of Gulema Iyesus in May 2014, have been acquitted and freed. The area is about 275km north of the capital, Addis Ababa.

Despite their acquittal, they do however still face a compensation order given by a judge in July 2016 – even though they were appealing their conviction – to pay for the damages to the church. These were valued at more than 1.2 million Ethiopian Birr (worth over US\$40,000 at the time of the sentence). Mekuria and Jemberu are both single and have no property, but Tilahun, who is married and a father of three, risks losing his property.

The men appeared in court in Debiremarkos, north of Addis Ababa, on 25 January to request the compensation order to be cancelled, but the judge said he needed time to go through the file and understand how the verdict was reached. Their next court appearance is due on 20 February.

The release follows almost three years of flawed court proceedings and delays. Mekuria and Jemberu, both Protestant evangelists, were arrested a month after the Ethiopian Orthodox Church building burned down, accused of starting the fire. Police then also arrested Tilahun, also a Protestant Christian and small kiosk owner, who was accused of funding the attack.

Although witnesses said the men were not near the building at the time of the fire and the single prosecution witness gave inconsistent testimony, the judge found all three guilty on 28 October, 2014, with sentences of up to nine years in prison each.

In November 2014 another judge upheld the ruling, prompting the men's lawyer to appeal to the Regional State Supreme Court in the Amhara state capital of Bahirdar. That appeal was rejected. A final appeal, to the Federal Supreme Court in Addis Ababa, first to be heard in June 2015, had been postponed at least eight times since then, including from 10-13 January this year; the judge continually claimed he had inadequate time to look at the case.

The men have been held in Debiremarkos prison, notorious as a prison where opponents of the former Communist Ethiopian government were tortured and killed.

During the delays, Tilahun's father died of an unknown cause in May 2016. Local contacts told World Watch Monitor at the time: "It was traumatic for [Belete] in jail. The father was deeply saddened to see his son sentenced back in 2015. He was depressed after attending hearing after hearing. When the judge at the higher court upheld the ruling by the lower court, he was heard saying, 'May the God of truth vindicate your name', with deep frustration. A devoted EOC follower, he was not convinced about the accusations against his son. For Belete it's always been very concerning to see his father tirelessly attending all the hearings at such an old age."

Ethiopian state considers restricting 'Christian activity' to church buildings

World Watch Monitor (24.04.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2pdVlyM> - Ethiopia's northern Tigray State is considering adopting a new law that would restrict Christian activities to within official church compounds, rendering illegal the activities of smaller churches that do not own their own buildings and gather in houses.

The law, if passed, would most affect Christians from outside the Ethiopian Orthodox Church because any church that wanted to have its own land would need to prove that it had at least 6,000 members – a greater number than the total population of non-Orthodox Christians in the state.

The law would also ban Christians from evangelising outside of church compounds.

Local church leaders have raised their concerns about the law with the state government but have yet to receive a reply.

A similar law was recently ratified in neighbouring Amhara State which, together with Tigray, is home to most members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and local church leaders fear other states will copy the move.

Protestant population growing

Over the past decade Ethiopia’s religious map has changed considerably. For centuries Ethiopia, which some argue was the first nation in the world to accept Christianity, consisted of an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian core, a Sunni Muslim zone in the east, and an animist/indigenous-faith area in the south and the lowland reaches of the far west. In the last 10 years, indigenous faiths have diminished, in most cases yielding to Protestant Christianity, which is said to be the fastest-growing religious group in Ethiopia. This is making the country home to “one of the fastest growing evangelical churches in the world”, wrote theologian Allan Anderson in 2014.

Some former members of the Orthodox Church have also become Protestants, creating tension between the two communities.

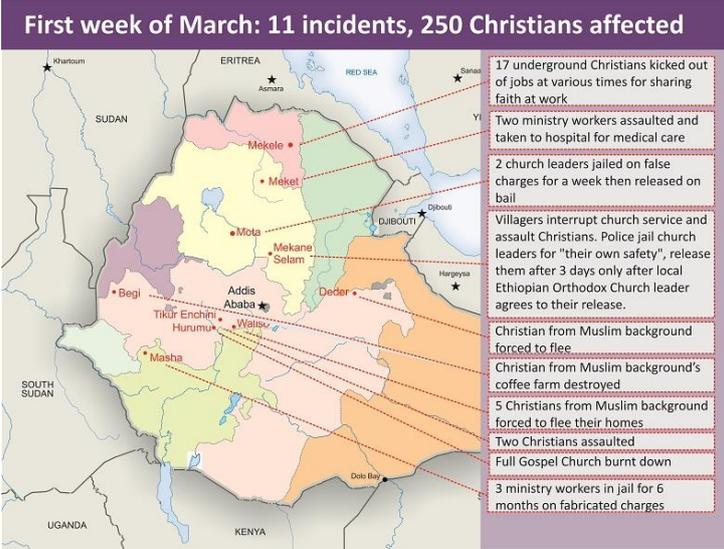
While Ethiopia’s increasingly controlling government seeks to further restrict religious institutions, to prevent dissent, Christians also face oppression from family members and the local community in other parts of the country, for instance in the Afar and Somali regions where ethnicity and Islam are interconnected.

An example is the story of Tutu, a widow, and her son, Biruk*, who live in a Muslim-dominated community in the south-western state of SNNP and have faced troubles since Tutu’s husband passed away, 18 months ago.

After his burial, local Muslims dug up his body and dumped it by the side of the road. In January, Biruk was assaulted and told that he and his mother would continue to face trouble until they converted to Islam. On 4 March, their house was burned down.

Tutu and Biruk’s story is not uncommon. Generally, attacks on Christians in Ethiopia seem to be increasing. According to reports received by World Watch Monitor, in March alone there were 11 attacks on Christians, affecting approximately 250 people (see map below).

The judicial system also often works against Christians in Ethiopia, particularly in areas where they are the minority. For example in February three Christians, falsely convicted and imprisoned for burning down an Ethiopian Orthodox Church building in the rural community of Gulema Iyesus in May 2014, were [acquitted by the Supreme Court and freed](#), but still ordered to pay for damage to the church, valued at the equivalent of over US\$40,000 at the time of sentencing.



Four Ethiopian teenagers leave prison 'in good health' after sentence for giving out Christian book

World Watch Monitor (30.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2jU0jLG> - Four Ethiopian teenagers given a one-month jail sentence for distributing Christian literature are reported to be in "good health" following their release from prison on 22 December.

The girls were found guilty of "inciting religious violence" and started their sentence on 25 November, despite three of them being minors.

Gifti, 14, Mihiret, 14, Eden, 15, and Deborah, 18, served their time in a large prison in Gelemiso, alongside criminals.

The Christian girls were distributing a book in the eastern Ethiopian town of Babile, not far from Harar – a city recognised by UNESCO as the fourth holy city of Islam – when they were first arrested.

Local Muslims said the book was an insult to Islam and, on 19 September, this led to an attack on the Protestant Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) in Babile, and the arrest of the four.

The book, *Let's speak the truth in love: Answers to questions by Ahmed Deedat*, was written in Ethiopia's main Amharic language by a local author. It 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.

Town officials arranged a meeting the day after the attack on the MKC, at which church leaders apparently apologised for the distribution of the book. Following the meeting, officials arrested Deborah, Eden, Eden's mother and a man known as Bekele.

That same night another church was attacked, and the next day church leaders were threatened when a group of 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 September, but arrested the remaining two teenagers, Gifti and Mihiret.

The four teenagers first appeared in court in Babile on 28 September. During police investigations, the girls were medically examined – a practice to determine the exact age of girls who don't have recorded birth dates. In Ethiopia, anyone under 18 cannot be tried in an adult court. Despite this, the judge transferred the case to a higher court in Harar.

After delays and the release of the girls on bail, after they paid Birr 3,000 (about \$135), they were sentenced at a court in Babile on 15 November for inciting religious violence.

Although Ethiopia is not a majority-Muslim country, the Harari region, close to the Somali border, has a significant Muslim presence. Ethiopia's constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but Christians who formerly adhered to Islam can face discrimination, threats and sometimes attacks.

Ethiopia is ranked no. 22 on the 2017 World Watch List of the 50 worst countries to live as a Christian, produced by Open Doors, which works with Christians under pressure for their faith.

Ethiopia jails 20 Muslims for pursuing sharia state

HRWF (04.01.2017) - According to Associated Press, the Washington Post and other media (<http://wapo.st/2iFZbxD>), an Ethiopian court has sentenced 20 Muslims to prison after they were found guilty of trying to establish a state ruled by Sharia law and inciting violence.

They were charged under Ethiopia's controversial anti-terrorism law and convicted last month. All but one received prison terms of five and a half years. Two were journalists working for a Muslim radio station.

The state-affiliated Fana Broadcasting Corporate, citing the court ruling, said on Tuesday 3rd January that the 20 defendants also were found to be "participating in a movement to secure the release of another Muslim group that was under detention." That group was said to have formed in order to counter government interference in their religious affairs but was detained on terror-related charges. Five members of that group were pardoned in September.

Muslims have long felt marginalized in Ethiopia and have carried out a number of protests since 2011. Some were met with force, and many protest leaders were jailed.

"The defendants didn't get a fair trial. In fact, we didn't expect the court to give a fair verdict," Mustafa Safi, the defendants' lawyer, told The Associated Press. "They were subjected to both a mistrial and a bad treatment at the infamous Kilinto detention center. They were even unable to pray there. But we will appeal the sentencing anyway."

HRWF Analysis: Are those 20 Muslims victims of violation of their religious freedom?

The total population of Ethiopia is about 100 million. The most recent census of 2007 estimated 44 percent of the population belongs to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), 34 percent is Sunni Muslim, and 19 percent belongs to Christian evangelical and Pentecostal groups.

According to the news published by Associated Press (AP) and other media the 20 Ethiopian citizens sentenced to long prison terms seem to be political activists and to belong to a Muslim minority group which is not named by AP and the beliefs of which are not clarified.

Considering that

- nothing is said about their teachings concerning human rights, equality of citizens and discrimination, or the status of women in the society they would like to impose on the Ethiopian population;
- there is no information about their position on the status of non-Muslims, in particular Jews and Christians;
- it is not known if they really reject the use of violence;
- it is not known if their teachings are in conformity with Article 5 of the ICCPR which states:

"1. Nothing in the present Covenant may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or perform any act aimed at the **destruction of any of the rights and freedoms recognized herein** or at their limitation to a greater extent than is provided for in the present Covenant.

2. There shall be no restriction upon or derogation from any of the fundamental human rights recognized or existing in any State Party to the present Covenant pursuant to law, conventions, regulations or custom on the pretext that the present Covenant does not recognize such rights or that it recognizes them to a lesser extent."

Human Rights Without Frontiers considers that

- these prisoners are not victims of violations of religious freedom as guaranteed by Article 18 of the ICCPR and the UN 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief;
- they cannot be identified as FoRB prisoners or human rights defenders but are political prisoners.

However, they have the right to a fair trial and to freedom from torture and inhumane or degrading treatment.
