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Sierra Leone government moves fast to quell tension over religious hate speech

By Abdul Rashid Thomas

The Sierra Leone Telegraph (28.09.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2xPOa25> - Sierra Leone's ministry of religious affairs has taken swift steps to indefinitely suspend the operating licence of a church established by a Nigerian pastor – Victor Ajisafe, who last weekend caused national outrage, after preaching religious hate sermon to his congregation in Freetown.

The Sanctuary Praise Church founded by Victor Ajisafe has been sealed off by police. And after his arrest yesterday, the Nigerian Pastor is still being held by police in Freetown while investigations are being conducted, Sierra Leone Telegraph has been informed.

Police say that he is also being held in custody for his own protection, awaiting decision by the government as to whether he will be charged for inciting mass religious disturbance and possibly violence.

The Nigerian pastor was caught on video delivering his incendiary hate speech against Islam, referring to Muslims as non-existent. "There is no such thing as Islam in the history of Sierra Leone," he said, thus questioning the legitimacy of 75% of the population of Sierra Leone who class themselves as Muslims.

"There are only two religions in Sierra Leone – you have idol worshiping and Christianity," the Nigerian pastor told his congregation.

As calls for the imprisonment and subsequent deportation of the pastor grow, the Nigerian community in Sierra Leone has today published a statement dissociating itself from the countryman and his hate speech. This is what they said today:

"The Attention of the Nigerian Community in Sierra Leone has been drawn to a sermon delivered by Pastor Victor Ajisafe in his church 4 days ago wherein fiery aspersions were cast on the person of the distinguished Islamic Scholar and internationally respected Cleric, Mufti Menk and President Ahmed Tejan Kabba of blessed memory.

"The Nigerian Community in Sierra Leone has thrived in this country for well over a hundred years as a part and parcel of the historical, cultural and economic evolution of this great nation.

"Significantly, we also have a large Muslim membership and indeed mosques founded by some of our past elders especially from the Hausa and Yoruba ethnicities in this country. We have become constrained to articulate this press release in the interest of all peace loving Nigerians resident in Sierra Leone.

"We hereby unequivocally dissociate our community from the sermon preached by Pastor Ajisafe. The views he expressed neither represent nor characterise us. Nigerians in Sierra Leone have enjoyed as well as, contributed positively to the thriving atmosphere of admirable religious and tribal tolerance in this country.

"As a community we have worked hard over the years to enhance this exemplary ambience of tolerance. We should therefore not be singled out as being in support of the views expressed in the pulpit of a church.

"The Sanctuary Praise Church as far as we know is a registered Sierra Leonean religious organisation and has a visibly large Sierra Leonean membership like most churches do. As a law abiding community committed to peace in Sierra Leone we wish to unequivocally express as follows:

(1) Pastor Ajisafe's sermon on that day does not by any shred represent the views of the Nigerian Community nor does it espouse that of the Nigeria National Union of Sierra Leone

(2) We are of the view that religious leaders by virtue of the huge congregations and audience they control, have a primary responsibility to preach tolerance and peace not hate and divisiveness

(3) No single group of ECOWAS nationals in Sierra Leone understands better than Nigerians the extent to which religion could be an instrument of discord in any society. We are all living witnesses to the catastrophe wreaked by Boko Haram in Nigeria. We certainly do not wish that for Sierra Leone or any other country for that matter

(4) We appeal for restraint and urge persons who see this as a Nigeria-Sierra Leone matter to henceforth disabuse their minds of such a tainted posture. Such wild stereotyping has a potential to catalyse into chaos and needless damage to lives and properties of innocent persons.

(5) We commend the timely intervention of Government, Religious authorities and civil society organisations in preventing this incident from spiralling beyond control.

(6) We remain a law abiding community committed to supporting the developmental strides of this great country. We will continue to make our contributions to the maintenance of calm, law and order as the police investigations proceed."

Sierra Leone's Assistant Inspector General of Police – Al Sheik has given an update to the public about the fate of the Nigerian pastor. [This is what he said.](#)