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## **Algeria closes fourth church in four months**



*Interior of a church in Tizi Ouzou (photo credit: World Watch Monitor)*

By Abdelaziz Bouteflika

World Watch Monitor (22.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2I43trM> - Another church has been closed down in northern Algeria, as pressure against Christians intensifies in the Maghreb country.

The village church in Azagher, near the town of Akbou, was forced to stop all activities on 2 March. The church had been running for over six years.

Two weeks earlier, on 18 February, the leaders of the church had received a notification that they must close their church within 15 days.

The notification stated that the church building, "which was originally intended for the poultry business", did not meet the standards required by law in order to host a public meeting. It pointed to the lack of a second exit or fire extinguisher.

It also said the fact the church had a foreign pastor (he is from the Democratic Republic of the Congo) contradicted a 2008 law "concerning the conditions of entry of foreigners into Algerian territory and their residence, as well as their movements".

The church is the fourth forced to close in the past four months. The three others were in or around the town of Oran, 600km west of Akbou. Unlike the church in Azagher, the three other churches were all affiliated to the EPA, Algeria's main Protestant-church body, officially recognised by the government since 1974.

Of the EPA's 45 churches, 25 have received notifications to comply with safety standards in the past few months.

Advocacy group Middle East Concern said earlier this year that the closures were part of a "coordinated campaign of intensified action against churches by the governing authorities".

But the Algerian Minister of Religious Affairs denied discriminating against the country's Christian minority. Mohamed Aissa told Ennahar TV earlier this month that the churches "did not meet the standards required of a place of worship".

"The institutions that were closed have been closed down because they were built without complying with the regulations of the Republic," he said, adding that if a building lacks emergency exits, it must be closed, "even if it is a mosque".

"When a place of worship is built without any notice showing it's a place of worship, which may enable the state to protect it, this place must be closed," he added.

In response, a spokesperson from the EPA told World Watch Monitor "the government is simply implementing the 2006 law of regulating non-Muslim worship. This law is a Sword of Damocles suspended above the churches. It is the legal instrument that the government uses to silence the Church. The purpose of this law is precisely to curb the activities of churches and to control them".

The law stipulates that permission must be obtained before using a building for non-Muslim worship, and that such worship can only be conducted in buildings which have been specifically designated for that purpose.

But in practice, the authorities have failed to respond to almost all applications from churches for places of worship, including churches affiliated with the state-approved EPA.

In view of the authorities' failure to respond to applications, it has become standard practice for churches to rent premises and inform the local authorities that they have done so.

A local church leader, who wanted to remain anonymous, told World Watch Monitor the government "does absolutely nothing to help Christian communities to afford an

adequate place of worship". He added that it is almost impossible for Christian communities to buy their own plot of land because it is so expensive.

As a result, all Protestant churches, affiliated with the EPA or not, are forced to rent premises, while those who rent their properties to a church also face threats and intimidation from the authorities, making it even more difficult for Christian communities to find a place to meet.

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## **Algeria government criticised over heavy fines for transporting Bibles**



*(photo credit: World Watch Monitor)*

World Watch Monitor (16.03.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2GHbmUE> - The Algerian government has once again been criticised for alleged discrimination against the country's Christian minority, this time by handing large fines to two brothers for carrying over 50 Bibles in their car.

Prosecutors claimed the Bibles were to be used for proselytism, though the brothers said they were for church use only.

The Protestant Church of Algeria (known by its French acronym, EPA) issued a statement to the press denouncing the "intimidation" of Nouredine and Belabbes Khalil. This follows the recent closure of several of the denomination's churches.

The EPA is a federation of 45 Protestant churches, mostly in Algeria's northern coastal region, officially recognised by the government in 1974.

The two men were each fined 100,000 dinar (US\$900) on 8 March by a court in Tiaret, about 300 kilometres southwest of the capital, Algiers.

The brothers' case goes back to March 2015, when their car was pulled over by the police. They were arrested for carrying 56 Bibles, and interrogated about where the books came from and what they were going to do with them.

They said the Bibles were for their church community, which Nouredine leads, so the police released them and returned the books. However, the case was later referred to a prosecutor and the legal action against them commenced.

In December 2017, they were each sentenced to two years in prison and a 50,000-dinar fine (\$450). But at their appeal hearing on 8 March, the judge overturned the jail sentences, instead giving them suspended sentences of three months each. However, their fines were doubled.

World Watch Monitor understands that the men were convicted under Algeria's 2006 law regulating non-Muslim worship, which forbids the printing, storing and distribution of materials intended to "shake the faith" of a Muslim.

There have been several similar cases in recent years that have been frozen. There are concerns that these cases will now be revived.

The EPA has assigned a group of lawyers to help the two men make a further appeal against the 8 March verdict.

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## Sentencing of pastor adds to uptick in persecution in Algeria



(Photo credit: Wikipedia)

### **Rights advocates fear coordinated campaign against Christianity**

Morning Star News (12.03.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2GvN4gg> - In the latest of a rash of persecution incidents in Algeria, a judge on Thursday (March 8) sentenced a pastor to a fine and a suspended prison sentence under a law that prohibits causing Muslims to doubt their religion, sources said.

In Freneda, Tiaret Province, pastor Nordine B. was ordered to pay a fine of 100,000 dinars (US\$868) and received a three-month suspended prison sentence, the pastor confirmed to Morning Star News in an email.

Prosecutors had sought a six-month prison sentence and a fine of 50,000 dinars (US\$434), another Algerian pastor confirmed to Morning Star News in an email. His name is withheld for security reasons.

"The pastor of the church of Tiaret was convicted of proselytism," the pastor said. "He will appeal, so the verdict is not final."

Algerian News outlet *Algerie Part* last week reported a Christian leader as saying the charge against Pastor Nordine was ridiculous, as the only evidence police presented was the fact that he was carrying Christian books.

The charge was based on Algeria's controversial Law 03/2006, commonly known as Law 06/03, according to *Algerie Part*. The prosecutor's requested prison sentence and fine,



like the judge's actual prison sentence and fine, was less than that stipulated by the 2006 law, which calls for a prison term of two to five years and a fine of 500,000 to 1 million dinars (US\$4,343 to US\$8,687) for anyone who "incites, constrains, or utilizes means of seduction tending to convert a Muslim to another religion, or using for this purpose the institutions of education, health, social, cultural, or educational institutions, or other establishment, or financial advantage; or makes, stores or distributes printed documents or films or other audiovisual medium or means intended to undermine the faith of a Muslim."

Christian leaders say the charge was unconstitutional, citing the Algerian constitution's Article 42, which guarantees freedom of belief, opinion and worship.

"The situation for Christians here is very critical," the unnamed pastor in Algeria told Morning Star News by email. "We ask, why this relentlessness of the authorities on us?"

### ***Rash of Persecution***

The case follows several instances of harassment of churches and Christians in the past three months that has raised concerns of a government campaign against Christianity, according to advocacy group Middle East Concern (MEC).

In Oran Province in northwest Algeria, the unnamed church pastor told Morning Star News that three churches have been closed. On the pretext that they didn't have state approval, police sealed shut a church in Oran city and a church in nearby El Ayaida on Feb. 27, he said, adding that another area church in Ain el-Turk was closed on Nov. 9.

"Officials gave us a period of three months to regularize our situation, but they did not respect this deadline," the pastor told Morning Star News. "The same day I received the forms to file to register as an association, the police were ordered to seal the two places of worship in Oran city center and El Ayaida."

Authorities later came to a site where members of the Oran city center church were worshipping and stopped the service, he said.

"We filed a letter of appeal at the level of provincial security services, and we informed them that the church registration file is ready," he said. "It is expected that the judge will give the order for a general meeting, but so far there has been no response."

A Christian-owned bookshop in Oran city also was forcibly closed in November, and police visited a church training center in Boudjemaa, in Kabylie Region, and stopped activities, MEC reported.

"The affected churches are all affiliated with the legally recognized Protestant Church of Algeria [l'Église Protestante d'Algérie, or EPA)," MEC reported. "EPA questions the motives behind the inspection visits and believes that the accusations leading to the church closures have been unfounded."

The World Evangelical Alliance's Religious Liberty Commission said in a press statement that Algerian authorities in November formed a committee from various agencies to inspect churches for compliance with safety regulations, but that it is also questioning whether churches have permits for religious activities.

"The committee has accordingly ordered several churches, two Bible schools, and a Christian-owned bookshop to close down," the Feb. 26 statement read, adding that the restrictions have also led to an increase in arrests of Christians.

"We call on the government of Algeria to ensure that the religious freedom of Christians is safeguarded in accordance with international law," said Godfrey Yogarajah, deputy secretary general of the WEA. "We also call on the government, in keeping with the country's constitution, to take all steps necessary to guarantee the freedom of worship for all religious groups in the country."

### **Arrests**

In December three Christians from Tizi Ouzou were arrested in Chlef, 200 kilometers (124 miles) northwest of Algiers, where they were to meet colleagues at a café, MEC reported.

"Police entered the café, found they were in possession of Christian literature, and took them to the police station, where they were investigated at length by the national gendarmerie," MEC reported. "A local newspaper known for its hostility to Christians described the incident as a 'foiled evangelism attempt,' falsely accusing the Christians of working under the cover of humanitarian activities and of alluring young Muslims to convert by means of financial and travel inducements."

The three visitors were released but could face proselytism charges, MEC said. That same third week of December, two churches in Kabylie Region's Bejaia Province received a visit from officials from the municipality, the ministry of religious affairs, the fire brigade, the national gendarmerie and the intelligence department, according to MEC.

The officials told church leaders the visits were inspections for safety regulations. The two buildings are used by eight congregations.

In the southern Algerian town of Ouargla, another church received an order from the provincial governor to cease all religious activities following a building inspection on Dec. 14, MEC reported. Officials said the church lacked authorization to use the building for worship and failed to comply with safety requirements. They told church leaders to obtain permission from the ministry of religious affairs.

The officials said that worship activities at the church, which has been active for 10 years, can resume only three months after obtaining permission, according to MEC.

Algeria's population of 35.4 million people is more than 97 percent Muslim and .28 percent Christian.

### **Deportation**

In December Algeria also deported a French Christian without explanation. Louis Martinez of the French Reformed Church had left Algeria on a trip and was returning on Dec. 13 when authorities stopped him at the Oran airport and deported him, according to MEC.

Martinez and his wife had lived in Algeria for several years and had just been issued a new residency permit valid for 10 years, according to MEC.

Manager of a private French-language school, Martinez was known as a close friend of a local church.

"The authorities gave no reason for his deportation," MEC reported. "His wife was subsequently able to settle their family and business affairs in Algeria and has recently also left the country. Algerian church leaders note that this deportation is consistent with a wider pattern of denial of visas for church visitors, which seems to be part of a policy

whereby the Algerian authorities are restricting the ability of Algerian churches to partner with outside entities.”

Algeria ranked 42nd on Christian support organization Open Doors’ 2018 World Watch List of the countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.

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## **Algerian pastor decries church closure**

World Watch Monitor (05.03.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2tjyxkP> - The leader of a Protestant church in Algeria’s north-western town of Aïn Turk (15km from Oran city) has denounced the closure of his church four months ago.

Youssef Ourahmane founded the House of Hope church more than 20 years ago – in 1997 – but on 9 November, 2017, the local authorities closed down the church, claiming it had been used to “illegally print Gospels and publications intended for evangelism”.

The police notification also stated that the church didn’t have state approval.

But Ourahmane, speaking on a video shared with World Watch Monitor, said the closure of the church was based on “false accusations”.

“God has done an amazing work through this ministry,” he said. “Unfortunately, the ‘enemy’ [the Devil] has not been happy. All these years he tried by all means to stop us, to slow us.

“But we believe that God is in control. He will not allow any hair to fall, without his will, from our head.”

Ourahmane also called on fellow Christians around the world to pray for his church.

Two other churches – L’Oratoire (The Oratory) in Oran’s city centre, and a village church in Layayda (about 40km from Oran) – were also sealed off by police last week.

The police notifications again stated that the churches didn’t have state approval.

Since December, 25 out of the 45 churches affiliated to Algeria’s main Protestant Church body – the Protestant Church of Algeria (known as EPA, its French acronym) – have been visited by a committee of officials from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, national gendarmerie, intelligence department and fire brigade.

The churches were informed that the visits were aimed at checking compliance with safety regulations, and they were given three months’ notice.

They were also advised to seek permission from the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

On 21 February two churches (among the 25 which received notifications) in the city of Tizi Ouzou, in the eastern province of Kabylie, were asked “to cease all religious activities immediately”.

EPA leaders called the closures “unjustifiable”. They noted that all the affected churches are affiliated with the EPA, which has been officially recognised by the government since 1974.

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## Two more churches closed, others threatened

World Watch Monitor (01.03.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2Fo4ddq> - Local authorities in Algeria's north-western city of Oran have closed two more churches amidst growing pressure on Christians in the Maghreb country.

The two churches – L'Oratoire (The Oratory) in Oran's city centre, and a village church in Layayda (about 40km from Oran) – were sealed off by police on Tuesday, 27 February.

The police notification stated that the churches didn't have state approval. The decision is not the first of its kind in Oran.

On 9 November 2017, another church in the town of Aïn Turk (15km from Oran) was also closed. The authorities claimed the church had been used to "illegally print Gospels and publications intended for evangelism".

Since December, 25 out of the 45 churches affiliated to the main Protestant Church body in Algeria – the Protestant Church of Algeria (known as EPA, its French acronym) – have been visited by a committee of officials from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, national gendarmerie, intelligence department and fire brigade.

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EPA leaders called the closures "unjustifiable". They noted that all the affected churches are affiliated with the EPA, which has been officially recognised by the government since 1974.

On Saturday 24 February the EPA called for a week of prayer and fasting for the nation. In light of the increasing pressure, the World Evangelical Alliance has also called on the Algerian government "to ensure that the religious freedom of Christians is safeguarded in accordance with international law".

Godfrey Yogarajah, Deputy Secretary-General of the WEA and head of its Religious Liberty Commission, added: "We also call on the government, in keeping with the country's constitution, to take all steps necessary to guarantee the freedom of worship for all religious groups in the country."

### **Growing pressure**

Other forms of restriction have been also reported in recent weeks in Algeria.

On 13 December 2017, a French Christian, resident in Oran for several years, was denied re-entry to the country.

Pastor Louis Martinez, in his sixties, is affiliated with the French Reformed Church. He and his wife had been running a private French-language school.

According to Christian advocacy group Middle East Concern, Pastor Martinez was stopped at Oran Airport and asked to submit his residency permit, which had been recently issued and was valid for ten years, and then informed he must leave Algeria.

The authorities gave no reason for his deportation, MEC said. His wife was subsequently able to settle their family and business affairs in Algeria and has recently also left the country.

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## **'Intensified campaign' against Algeria's churches**



**The Cathedral of Algiers. (Photo: World Watch Monitor)**

World Watch Monitor (03.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2Eeci1u> - Churches and individual Christians in Algeria have faced increased restrictions in recent months, raising concerns that these pressures signal a "coordinated campaign of intensified action against churches by the governing authorities", according to Christian advocacy group [Middle East Concern](#).

On 19 December, three Christians were arrested in Chlef, 200km north-west of the capital, Algiers. According to MEC, they were visiting from the north-eastern town of Tizi Ouzou and had arranged to meet a contact at a café.

"Police entered the café, found they were in possession of Christian literature, and took them to the police station, where they were investigated at length", MEC said.

"A local newspaper, known for its hostility to Christians, described the incident as a 'foiled evangelism attempt', accusing the Christians of working under the cover of humanitarian activities and of alluring young Muslims to convert by means of financial and travel inducements."

MEC said the three Christians were released but "may face charges of proselytism".

During the same week, two churches in the province of Bejaia, in the north-eastern region of Kabylie, were reportedly visited by a committee of officials from the ministry of religious affairs, fire brigade, national gendarmerie and intelligence department.

"The churches were informed that the visits were to check compliance with safety regulations," Mec said. "The two buildings host meetings of eight church congregations in Bejia. The result of the inspection is pending."

In Ouargla in the south of Algeria, another church, which has been active for ten years, reportedly "received an order from the provincial Governor to cease all religious activities" following a buildings inspection on 14 December.

"Leaders were accused of lacking authorisation to use the building as a place of worship, and of failing to comply with safety requirements," MEC said. "They were advised to seek permission from the ministry of religious affairs, and [told] that worship activities can only recommence three months after obtaining such permission."

Previously, in November, a church and Christian-owned bookshop in the north-western town of Aïn Turk, near Oran, were forcibly closed, as World Watch Monitor reported.

According to MEC, another church training centre in Boudjemaa, in the Kabylie region, was visited by the police and has since halted its operations. The leaders are to be investigated next month.

"The affected churches are all affiliated to the Protestant Church of Algeria [l'Église Protestante d'Algérie, or EPA], officially recognised in 1974," MEC reports. "The EPA questions the motives behind the inspection visits, and believes that the accusations leading to the church closures have been unfounded."