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## **Ethiopian Christians cleared of holding 'illegal meetings'**

World Watch Monitor (08.09.2015) - On 26 Aug, four months after their initial arrest, a judge dismissed all charges against the seven Christians charged with holding "illegal meetings in secret locations" and ordered that their bail costs be refunded.

"The Lord is always good and He can turn everything into the good of His people. Imprisonment for the name of the Lord is not a curse. The Lord can turn it into a source of strength and courage," said one of the Christians, who wished to thank those who had been praying for them.

*Below is World Watch Monitor's original report, published 15 May.*

### ***Nervous wait for Ethiopians after baptism arrests***

Seven Ethiopian Christians have been charged with holding "illegal meetings in secret locations", a charge they deny as they say they have fulfilled legal requirements.

The men were released on bail after a court hearing in the town of Assela, 100 miles south of the capital, Addis Ababa, on Monday (11 May).

Local church leaders clubbed together to pay the necessary bail charge of 5000 Birr (\$250) each, after police were granted another week to conclude investigations.

The Christians were first arrested on Saturday 25 April, following an ordinary service, in which 40 new Christians were baptised. They insist the church had all the necessary approvals for gathering in place.

"They have informed government officials about their ministry and their meetings both orally and in writing," said one local Christian, who wished to remain anonymous.

During the raid, an estimated 15 police officers surrounded the church's meeting place, then arrested the three church leaders, before chasing after four of the newly baptised Christians, who had fled out of fear. The four are all from Muslim backgrounds and had faced pressure from their families to return to Islam. They were arrested at the local bus station.

Police also confiscated documents providing details on church membership. Church leaders say they are concerned the incident may lead to even greater pressure on the already vulnerable community of new Christians.

After their arrest, the Christians were held for two days at the police station, before being transferred to the local prison. They first appeared at court on Monday 27 April, where the judge granted police an extra week to investigate. A week later, the pattern was repeated.

The men are said to be in good spirits, despite the difficult circumstances they are facing.

"The overall situation in the prison is very difficult. More than 168 inmates are stuffed into one small space. The Christians each have just enough space to lie on their sides at night. One of them has to sleep in the area they use as a toilet," said an anonymous source.

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Ethiopia is No. 22 on Open Doors' World Watch List, which ranks the countries where life is hardest for Christians. Two thirds of the population is Christian, but ahead of parliamentary elections on 24 May, the government is thought to be suspicious about religion in general and Christians in particular.

North Ethiopia was one of the first Christian nations in the world – from the 4th Century, reports Operation World, a global missions handbook. It reports that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was the state church from 1270 until the 1974 Marxist revolution which overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie. The Marxist regime persecuted Christians, especially evangelicals, with many churches destroyed and congregations scattered. Since 1991, when the Marxist regime collapsed, there has been, technically, freedom of worship and witness, but, says Operation World, increasingly active and ambitious Islamist groups threaten the delicate balance of religious powers.

On 19 April, Islamic State released a video purporting to show the execution of 28 Ethiopian Christians in Libya. Two of them, Eyasu Yikunoamlak and Balcha Belete, were later identified by their families, who said they had left Ethiopia two months prior and were attempting to migrate to Europe.

Last week a further 27 Ethiopians were reportedly "rescued" from Islamist groups in Libya.

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## **Ethiopian Orthodox leaders jailed after protesting about persecution**

World Watch Monitor (25.08.2015) - [https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2015/08/3982042/?utm\\_source=Newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=Ethiopian+Orthodox+leaders+jailed+after+protesting+about+persecution&utm\\_campaign=Ethiopian+Orthodox+leaders+jailed+after+protesting+about+persecution](https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2015/08/3982042/?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Ethiopian+Orthodox+leaders+jailed+after+protesting+about+persecution&utm_campaign=Ethiopian+Orthodox+leaders+jailed+after+protesting+about+persecution) - A district court in Ethiopia has charged six members of an Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) with inciting public disturbance, destroying public trust in government officials and spreading hatred after it surfaced in the media that official complaints were made to the government about increasing persecution of Christians in a Muslim-dominated area in the south of the country.

The court found the men guilty on 7 August and sentenced them to between five and almost nine years in prison.

The men were members of St Mary's Orthodox Church in Kiltyo, 180km south of the capital Addis Ababa in the Silte zone of SNNP state. Silte is a Muslim-dominated zone that came into existence after the Silte people unanimously chose to form a separate zone in a referendum held in 2001.

A number of Ethiopia's prominent Muslim politicians come from Silte, including the current Minister of Defence, the Minister of Communications and the current caucus leader for women's affairs in the federal parliament.

Since the new zone's inception over a decade ago, its capital, Worabe, has seen tremendous growth and is now home to at least four prominent mosques. But leaders from the EOC have been complaining about increasing persecution, including attacks on their church and its members by local Muslims and officials of the local government. These complaints have received considerable attention from local independent media outlets.

### ***Situation likened to ISIS executions in Libya***

On 11 March six members of St Mary's Orthodox Church's Administrative Committee wrote a letter addressed to national leaders of the EOC and copied to various government institutions, including the office of the Prime Minister in which they listed the persecution they have been facing. According to them this included discrimination in job opportunities, unfair dismissal from jobs, unjustly negative feedback on job performance, burning of EOC church buildings, physical attacks and threats against their lives.

The authors said their situation had become unbearable and they likened it to the circumstances in Libya where, in April, so-called Islamic State (IS) militants filmed the execution of 30 EOC members and circulated the video on the web.

The matter of the IS executions is a highly emotive subject in Ethiopia and has led to protests against the government for perceived poor handling of the situation.

When the administrative committee letter was leaked to the media, local government officials summoned the authors to a meeting and demanded an apology. Citing local sources, local privately owned media reported that the leaders' explanation did not "win the officials' understanding": the latter told the authors that going to the media was a mistake.

The six leaders wrote a letter of apology. That did not deter the district prosecutor from charging the committee members on 6 July with inciting public disturbance, destroying public trust in government officials and spreading hatred. On 7 August the Eastern Azeret Berbere district court found them guilty of all charges.

The judge sentenced administrative committee leader, Yemariam Worke Teshager to eight years and eight months in prison and sentenced each of the others to five years and six months in prison. They are Masresha Seife, Nigatua Lema, Mulugeta Aragaw, Habtamu Teka and Maru Lema.

The six men have since been transferred to prison in Worabe, the capital of the Muslim-dominated Silte zone. The leader of the regional EOC diocese has indicated that they will appeal the verdict, but also said: "Imprisonment is common in Christianity, and it is good to be persecuted".

For many years, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has been opposing Christians who left its ranks to join (mostly) non-traditional Protestant churches, or Christians who joined the renewal movements within the EOC. However, along with members of these non-traditional Protestant churches the Church has become increasingly vulnerable to pressure from Muslim extremism in eastern, western and south-central parts of the country where Muslims are in the majority.

### ***Christian youth jailed for evangelising***

Meanwhile in eastern Ethiopia last week a group of 15 Christian youths were physically assaulted, arrested and incarcerated with restrictive penalties imposed on the local Christian community they were visiting during an evangelistic mission. The young people had travelled 430km from the capital Addis Ababa to visit the eastern Ethiopian town of Karamile in a Muslim dominated area of Oromia state.

Trouble started on the first day of their visit when a group of people from Karamile opposed their evangelism and physically assaulted two of the female members of the group. Police quickly intervened but instead of taking action against the aggressors, arrested and jailed all 15 visiting youths.

The officials released them later in the day after local church leaders intervened and requested their release.

The following day town administrators and security officers summoned all church leaders in Karamile to a meeting and ordered them to stop all evangelistic activities outside of the church premises. They also said that although the Christians had the right to pray privately in their homes with their families, they were not allowed to invite other people to such prayers.

These restrictions are in conflict with the Constitution of Ethiopia, which guarantees freedom of religion and protects freedom of expression without interference. Ethiopia ranks 22 on Christian charity Open Doors' 2015 World Watch List of the 50 most difficult countries in which to live as a Christian.

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## **Ethiopia jails two Christians for distributing Bibles**

Barnabas Fund (02.04.2015) <https://barnabasfund.org/news/Ethiopia-jails-two-Christians-for-distributing-Bibles?audience=GB> - Two men who were distributing Bibles in Ethiopia's Melka Belo region were arrested in separate incidents and later released after enduring physical abuse and harassment from authorities.

According to International Christian Concern (ICC), Gemechu Jorgo and Sheikh Amin were arrested on 10 March and 13 March respectively. Both men were later released on 23 March.

While he was being held in prison, District Administrator Jamal Adam used Jorgo's Bible to slap him in the face three times after Jorgo reminded him of his constitutional right to practise his faith freely.

Sheikh Amin is a recent convert to Christianity, having previously been leader of a mosque in Burka Negeya. While he was being held in prison, prison officials persistently attempted to pressurise Amin into renouncing Christianity, which he refused to do.

ICC reports that local authorities in the Melka Belo region are attempting to incite anti-Christian behaviour among local Muslims.

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## **Ethiopia frees Ex-Muslim jailed for faith in Christ**

Amhari movies (14.02.2015) - <http://www.amharicmovies.com/news/17828-ethiopia-frees-ex-muslim-jailed-for-faith-in-christ.html> An ex-Muslim who was detained in Ethiopia after refusing to abandon his faith in Jesus Christ and return to Islam was

expected to be released Saturday, January 14, following six months behind bars, rights activists involved in the told BosNewsLife.

Soka Araro was among three Christian men detained on what their supporters called trumped up charges of growing and distributing illegal substances.

Their arrest in the town of Shashemene, some 240 kilometers (150 miles) south of the capital Addis Ababa, came amid reports of growing pressure on Christians with a Muslim-background to recant their faith.

Ethiopia's government "has also limited freedom of expression, making it gradually more difficult for Christians in the Muslim-majority regions to worship openly," said advocacy and aid group International Christian Concern (ICC), which closely monitored the case.

Besides Araro two other Christians, Nura Araro and Obsa Ogeta, were detained but later released. Araro was soon freed after his charges were dropped, while Obsa Ogeta was placed on bail "in October and later released and acquitted of the charges in January" added ICC.

### ***Prison negotiations***

The group said the men were released following negotiations between ICC's local Ethiopia representative and prison officials.

It ends an ordeal that began with threats, their pastor recalled earlier. "Before their imprisonment, people sent messages to these guys, saying, 'if you are not back to your [Islamic] faith, you will face our trap,'" the church leader said in published remarks.

"Its...widely known the imprisonment was religiously motivated. We know it to be an unconstitutional attack," the pastor added, speaking on condition of anonymity, amid security concerns. Nura Araro said local Muslims "orchestrated" a trap with police of regional "Kebele district leaders, political officers and court judges as well."

ICC's Regional Manager for Africa, Cameron Thomas, cautioned that while he was pleased the men have been freed amid an international campaign, concerns remain over the future. "By abusing legal institutions, radical Muslims have greatly neglected the rights of Christians across Ethiopia in recent years. We have seen case after case documenting the rights of Christians being ignored solely on the basis of religion."

Thomas told BosNewslife that "When essential freedoms such as these are removed, as in the case of Araro and Ogeto, the international Christian community must stand up on their behalf."

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