

A young Christian fined in Akbou

HRWF (01.07.2019) - On 27 June, a young Christian from Akbou was condemned to pay a fine of 50 000 DA for the «*exercise of a non-Muslim religion without authorization*». At a hearing held by the court of the same city on 29 May, the prosecutor had requested a two-year prison sentence.

On 17 October 2018, the gendarmerie sealed the church named « Ville de Refuge » closed. This church was linked to the officially recognized Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA) since it was opened in 2013. After that closure, the accused installed a big tent so that local Christians could hold religious services on Sunday.

On 16 May 2019, he was summoned by the judge for practising a religion without any authorization. Human rights activist and lawyer Sofiane Ikken declared to El Watan that freedom of worship is guaranteed by article 42 of the Constitution and this trial violates this provision. "This system of authorization is just a means of pressure to better control those believers and drive them underground to prepare prosecution", he said.

The EPA has declared that the closure of the church in Akbou, in the Kabylie province of Bejaia, was abusive and unfounded. The owner of the land being used by the Christian group has been charged for allowing unauthorized worship on his property, allegedly violating a 2006 Ordinance that regulates non-Muslim worship. The church involved has about 400 attendees.

Since November 2017 most EPA-affiliated churches have been visited by so-called "building-safety committees", which also ask for permits required for non-Muslim worship by the 2006 Ordinance. However, the government has yet to issue any license for a church building under this regulation.

The congregation in Akbou was visited by a "committee" in December 2017 which found safety code violations and ordered the church to close. The church has since rectified all the violations mentioned.

Several churches have since received written orders to cease all activities. A number were closed by authorities because they did not have a license, most recently in July 2018. Three of those closed churches have since been allowed to re-open.

Sources:

El Watan

<https://www.elwatan.com/regions/kabylie/bejaia/culte-un-jeune-chretien-condamne-a-akbou-23-06-2019>

Middle East Concern

<https://meconcern.org/2019/04/30/algeria-two-upcoming-court-cases/>