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## **SUDAN | Government Demolishes Church**

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned that a Sudanese Evangelical Presbyterian Church (SEPC) in El Haj Yousif, Khartoum North, was demolished Feb. 11 by Sudanese security agents. Witnesses reported that at least three police trucks arrived at the church without notice moments after the service had ended, and security personnel proceeded to clear and confiscate property before demolishing the church. The confiscated property included chairs, bibles and musical instruments.

The SEPC in El Haj Yousif was one of 25 churches earmarked for demolition in an official order signed in June 2016, and its leaders joined a legal challenge to prevent the government from confiscating and destroying their place of worship. The church has stated that it is the legal owner of the property and land, and has used the building as a place of worship since 1989. In May 2017, authorities demolished the last remaining church in the Soba Aradi district of Khartoum State, which had also been listed in the June 2016 order.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "The demolition of the Sudan Evangelical Presbyterian Church in El Haj Yousif without giving proper legal notice to the church, which is the legitimate owner of the property, is deeply concerning, and gives rise to fears for the future of the remaining churches listed in the 2016 order. The timing of the demolition, coming at the end of the Sunday service amidst a heavy police presence, is clearly an act of intimidation targeting the Christian community. We urge the government of Sudan to uphold the constitutionally-guaranteed right to freedom of religion or belief for all citizens without preference, and to ensure that the SEPC in El Haj Yousif has a place in which to worship and is fully compensated for its losses."

On Feb. 5 six SEPC members and an elder were fined for committing public nuisance. While the lay members were fined approximately \$138, Younan Tia, a church elder, was fined \$276. Another 18 church members were acquitted of the same charges. The group was arrested in

April 2017 as they peacefully protested against the takeover of a school run by the church. During a peaceful sit-in, Younan Abdulla, a 28 year-old SEPC elder, was fatally stabbed.

The SEPC has fought a long battle against government interference. The Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowments, which oversees religious affairs in Sudan, authorized two committees, elected in violation of cannon law, to act on behalf of the denomination. These illegally-convened committees have approved the sale of land and properties to Muslim investors against the wishes of the SEPCs leadership. In August 2015, the administrative court ruled that the government had erred by authorizing the illegally-convened to act on behalf of the denomination, but the ruling was ignored by the Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowments.

Another denomination, the Sudanese Church of Christ (SCOC), is also currently challenging a government decision to impose an unelected leadership committee to manage its affairs. The Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowments authorized the unelected committee to administrate on behalf of the denomination in August 2017.

The SEPC demolition occurred against the backdrop of a government crackdown on peaceful demonstrations against economic measures that have caused a sharp rise in the costs of basic commodities. Since January 2018, the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) has confiscated newspapers reporting on the protest and detained at least 15 journalists, opposition politicians and students.

Thomas added, "We call on the government of Sudan to end all unlawful interference in the affairs of religious establishments, to respect freedom of assembly and association and to release all those detained in the recent protests, while also encouraging the European Union, United States and United Kingdom to echo these calls in bilateral dialogues."