



1.24.2020

SUDAN | Churches Attacked Twice

Three churches in Blue Nile State were each burned down twice in the three weeks leading up to Jan. 16. The news comes amid criticism from local human rights defenders of the decision by the United States State Department to remove Sudan from its list of Countries of Particular Concern (CPC).

Reports by the Human Rights and Development Organization (HUDO), a human rights, peacebuilding and development organization, state that three churches located in different neighborhoods of Bout Town in Blue Nile State, were razed to the ground on the evening of Dec. 28, 2019. The churches were identified as belonging to the Sudan Internal Church, the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. Despite church members reporting these incidents to the police, there were no investigations into the attacks.

The Christian community rebuilt the churches from local materials; however, on Jan. 16, the three churches were burned down again. The churches filed cases with the local police once again but report that no further steps were taken.

Sudan's Minister of Religious Affairs, Nasr al-Din Mufreh, issued a statement Jan. 21 reaffirming the government's commitment to protecting freedom of religion or belief. The minister disputed reports that three churches were attacked stating that only one church had been affected by arson and that the police had arrested one person who was released due to insufficient evidence. The government statement included a commitment from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Blue Nile state government to re-build the church from modern materials to protect the building in future.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "Reports of churches in Blue Nile State being razed to the ground on two occasions in a matter of weeks are deeply worrying, and underscore criticisms that the State Department's decision was premature. Whilst we welcome the statement from the Minister of Religious Affairs, we urge the government to provide assistance in rebuilding the three churches, respond to the root causes of these attacks, and ensure that all places of worship in Bout Town are given the necessary police protection to prevent future attacks."

In December, the US State Department removed Sudan from the Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) list, a designation given to states guilty of particularly severe violations

of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). Instead the country was placed on a Special Watch List (SWL), as the State Department determined that the civilian-led transitional government had taken “significant steps” to address violations committed by the previous regime. However, human right defenders responded critically, arguing that it was still too early in the transition period to support the decision.

On Dec. 21, 2019, Demas Mragan, a lawyer specializing on FoRB, issued a statement in which he said, “At this point, we would like to stress that despite the positive spirit of the transitional government and a change in attitude towards religious freedom the effect of the most heinous violations of religious freedom remain until today. It is too early to talk of important progress until these changes are supported with practical action such as the return of all property belonging to churches that was seized by security services in the previous government, [...] law reform and constitutional reform so that internationally recognized rights are guaranteed domestically.”

In December 2019, the government announced it had repealed Sudan’s public order laws. However, the repealed laws were local laws implemented in each state. The national laws remain in effect through the 1991 Criminal Code, and it is under these laws that religious minority women have historically been arrested, fined and given lashes on public indecency charges. On 25 June 2015 twelve Christian women from the Nuba Mountains were arrested as they left the El Izba Baptist Church in Khartoum wearing trousers and skirts. Two of the women were subsequently found guilty of indecent or immoral dress and fined.