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SUDAN | Churches Targeted for Attacks

A temporary straw church building belonging to the Sudanese Church of Christ (SCOC) in Jabarona, Ombada, Omdurman, was set on fire on Aug. 14.

The church had previously been attacked by extremists four times between December 2019 and January 2020. In March, following calls from CSW, Sudan's Minister for Religious Affairs and Endowments, Nasr al-Din Mufreh, pledged to investigate the attacks, signing a ministerial order which appointed commissioners to carry out the investigation.

The commissioners were given seven days to complete their investigation. However, due to COVID-19 related restrictions, the investigation was expected to take longer to complete. No action has been taken so far, and Mufreh's commitment to rebuild a church in Blue Nile State has also not been implemented.

Following the most recent attack, a group of 13 residents submitted a letter to the Ombada local authority on Aug. 22 asking them to clear the square where the church is located within 3 months and threatening to undertake the action themselves if this is not done. A copy of the letter, which also contained death threats, was given to the church's committee. The letter states that any problems arising from this will be the local authority's responsibility. Even though the residents signed the letter giving their names and addresses, the local authority has taken no action against them.

Additionally, on Aug. 23, Bethel International Christian Church was prevented from meeting for prayer in the El Haj Yousif area of Khartoum Bahri. The congregation used to meet in the Evangelical Church before it was demolished by the authorities in 2018. Two years ago, the church began meeting in a rented house for worship. However, on Aug. 16, the local committee ordered them not to use the house as a church anymore, citing noise, even though the church has no loudspeakers and only meets on Sundays from 3 p.m. until 6 p.m. Nevertheless, on Aug. 23 the same committee prevented the congregation from gathering, asking them to provide a permit from the Ministry of Endowment, which they did not have. The church is one of several house churches in

Sudan, as it is very difficult, if it is not impossible, to obtain permission for the construction of a church. Moreover, there is currently no law forbidding the establishment house churches.

CSW's Founder President Mervyn Thomas said, "The fact that the SCOC building has been attacked once again despite commitments to investigate previous attacks on the property not only highlights a residual societal hostility that is inimical to freedom of religion or belief, but also the need for the Sudanese authorities to take effective action to protect these Christians and to bring those responsible to justice. The forced closure on spurious grounds of Bethel International Christian Church is a further illustration of a societal hostility that must be challenged and addressed whenever it is manifested. CSW continues to call for a full investigation into the attacks on the SCOC, and urges the local authorities in Ombada to take appropriate action against those who have threatened violence. We also call on the government to ensure that the congregation of Bethel International Christian Church and other religious minorities are able to build and maintain places of worship, in accordance with the right to freedom of religion or belief."

Last week Sudan's transitional government signed an agreement which pledged to separate religion from the state in the country's new constitution. The agreement, if implemented, will bring an end to over three decades of Islamic rule in the country. However, it is currently an agreement 'in principle', and is dependent on the redrafting of the constitution.

The agreement received mixed reactions from Arabic media. Some media outlets welcomed the development, while others (mainly affiliated with Islamist groups) have adopted a more reserved tone.

The commitment came just days after the government signed in initials a comprehensive peace agreement with members of the Sudan Revolutionary Front rebel alliance parties. The agreement is due to be actualized on Oct. 2, with the armed groups keeping their weapons until then.

In another recent development, on Aug. 13 a judge in Khartoum sentenced a Christian woman to 2 months imprisonment and a 50.000 SDG fine for violating Article 79 (dealing in alcohol) despite recent amendments stipulating that Article 79 is no longer applicable to non-Muslims, unless they supply alcohol to Muslims.

Mervyn Thomas added, "There have been some positive developments in Sudan in recent weeks; however, it is important to keep in mind that both the separation of religion and state and the implementation of the peace agreement are yet to be fully

actualized. We call on Sudan to ensure that both of these commitments are honored and implemented in a timely manner. While in some respects Sudan has come a considerable way since the removal of President Omar al Bashir last year, it is clear from developments, such as the sentence passed on the Christian woman in violation of recent amendments, that there is still a long way to go. International scrutiny remains essential. We therefore urge the UN Human Rights Council to adopt a resolution allowing for annual independent reports from an individual or body mandated to monitor, investigate, verify reported abuses, and make recommendations during the upcoming Council session.”