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Open Doors Brief

Algerian Church Closures

May 2008

Article 36 of the Algerian Constitution guarantees religious freedom. However, Article 2 of the Constitution states that Islam is the official state religion. Religious freedom for any religions outside of Islam was further limited with the implementation of new legislation in 2006. This ordinance makes expressing the Christian faith in a church service, by worship and prayer, almost impossible.

Algeria is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and freedom of religion or belief is enshrined in the Constitution. In practice, however, non-Muslim believers are pressured to halt their activities. The situation is rapidly deteriorating. Within six months, the Algerian authorities closed nearly half of the Protestant churches in the country. According to Algerian Christians, re-registration in accordance with government policy is near to impossible.

The Protestant Church of Algeria is comprised of 32 congregations ranging in size from several dozen to more than 1,000 members. Another 20 small fellowships exist independently. Of these 52 known churches and groups, 26 have been closed since November 2007. Christian groups in Algeria are now required to re-register according to Algeria's associations' law. Algerian Christians, however, have claimed that the government has blocked them from carrying out the re-registration of their churches. "The administration offices in Tizi-Ouzou did not want to or could not say which measures to take in order to obtain the famous 'certificate of conformity,'" church leaders said.

In addition to restrictions on church building and worship locations, the ordinance bans evangelistic materials and attempts to convert Muslims to other religions. Anyone found trying to convert a Muslim to Christianity can receive a sentence of two to five years imprisonment and fined up to \$15,430. This punishment is also enforced upon those found possessing or distributing materials with the purpose of Christian evangelism. Christianity is viewed by authorities as a form of terrorism, and Muslim schools and mosques have been encouraged to counter this "threat" to Algerian freedom.

Individual Incidents of Persecution

- On April 2, a court in Tiaret convicted a Christian to a two-year suspended sentence for proselytism. Authorities brought charges against the man, who requested anonymity, after he reluctantly gave a Bible to an undercover police officer who posed as someone interested in Christianity and insisted that he needed one.
- On March 29, a young woman was arrested at a checkpoint. She was detained at the police station for 24 hours for carrying 6 books about Christianity. Her court date is in May.
- On March 21, two men were detained after they were found with eleven Bibles, including their personal copies. The men were held for 24 hours and then released. They have been accused of proselytism.
- At the end of January 2008, three Algerian Christians were sentenced to three years in prison and given a fine of 500,000 Algerian Dinars for causing offense to the religion and the person of the prophet of Islam.

Open Doors Recommendations

- Ask the Algerian authorities to stop the closure of churches and reopen those that have already been closed by contacting Algerian Ambassador to the US, Amine Kherbi.
- Ask the Algerian authorities to review and revise their legislation, to bring it into conformity with Algeria's international commitments regarding its signature to the ICCPR.

Sources

Open Doors International Communications Center
Compass Direct News