



Refugee Documentation Centre (Ireland)
LEGAL AID BOARD

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Information regarding the treatment of Christians/Catholics in Algeria

The January 2010 *Human Rights Watch* World Report for Algeria, under the heading 'Freedom of Religion', notes:

"Ordinance 06-03, a 2006 law, prescribes prison terms for proselytizing by non-Muslims and forbids them from gathering to worship except in state-approved locations. Authorities refuse applications by protestant Christian groups to use buildings for worship, putting their members at risk of prosecution for worship in unauthorized places." (Human Rights Watch (20 January 2010) *World Report 2010 – Algeria*)

A January 2010 news article from *Compass Direct News*, states:

"Members of a church in Algeria's Kabylie region gathered to worship last Saturday (Jan. 16) in their new building despite a protest, vandalism and a fire that damaged the building the previous weekend.

Local Muslims bent on running the congregation out of the neighborhood set fires inside and outside the building on Jan. 9.

Before setting it on fire, the assailants ransacked the Tafat Church building in Tizi Ouzou, a city 100 kilometers (62 miles) east of Algiers. The perpetrators damaged everything within the new building, including electrical appliances.

'This last Saturday the church held a service even though not everyone was present,' said Mustapha Krim, president of the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA). 'But they continue.'

The protests against the new church building were unique in the Kabylie region, where the majority of Algeria's Christians live." (Compass Direct News (21 January 2010) *Algerian Church Continues in Spite of Burnt Building*)

Another *Compass Direct News* report from December 2009 notes:

"Nearly 50 Muslim members of a community in northern Algeria blocked Christians from holding a Christmas service on Saturday (Dec. 26) to protest a new church building in their neighborhood.

As Algerian Christian converts gathered for their weekly meeting and Christmas celebration that morning, they were confronted by protestors barring the doors of their church building. Tafat Church is located in Tizi-Ouzou, a city 100 kilometers (62 miles) east of the Algerian capital, Algiers. Established five years ago, the

church belongs to the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA). Until recently it met in a small rented building. In November it opened its doors in a new location to accommodate the growing needs of its nearly 350 congregants.

The local residents protesting were reportedly irritated at finding that a church building with many visitors from outside the area had opened near their houses, according to an El Watan report on Sunday (Dec. 27). The daily newspaper highlighted that the residents feared their youth would be lured to the church with promises of money or cell phones.

'This land is the land of Islam! Go pray somewhere else,' some of the protestors said, according to El Watan. Protestors also reportedly threatened to kill the church pastor.

The protestors stayed outside the church until Monday (Dec. 28), and that evening some of them broke into the new building and stole the church microphones and speakers, according to the pastor, Mustafa Krireche. As of yesterday (Dec. 30) the church building's electricity was cut.

One of Algeria's Christian leaders, Youssef Ourahmane, said he could not recall another display of such outrage from Algerians against Christians." (Compass Direct News (31 December 2009) *Algerian Muslims Block Christmas Service*)

Section II of the October 2009 *United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report for Algeria*, under the heading 'Restrictions on Religious Freedom', states:

"Christian leaders reported that the Government did not register their organizations and places of worship despite efforts to comply with the ordinance. Many Christian groups indicated that they had repeatedly attempted to register with the Government but were unsuccessful, facing a lack of information and a local government bureaucracy ignorant of the process. Some applicants reported that some government administrative officials indicated their unwillingness to process applications, even if an administrative process existed.

Although the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Services convened quarterly, most recently on April 7, 2009, it did not establish an administrative means to implement the ordinance and Christian practitioners reported that it did not approve any requests for accreditation by their religious associations. The governmental commission was created to regulate the registration process established by Ordinance 06-03.

Leaders of the Anglican Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and other Protestant churches reported that their applications for registration remained pending, in some cases for more than three years. Some said the Ministry of Religious Affairs offered occasional legal guidance on association laws and noted that complicated bureaucratic rules sometimes required that applications be resubmitted. According to reports, some Christian groups did not attempt to obtain legal status from the Government. During the reporting period, church

groups reported that approximately 22 churches that lacked government recognition reopened and held services.

The Interior Ministry has the sole authority to grant association rights to religious or non-religious groups. The difficulties faced by religious groups in obtaining legal status are the same as those faced by non-religious civil society groups, non-governmental organizations, and others, whose petitions to the Interior Ministry are generally met with silence rather than documented refusal.

Church groups stated that the Government denied the visa applications of some religious workers, citing the government ban on proselytizing.

In 2008 the Government ordered the closure of a small school in Tamanrasset run by Catholic missionaries as a social welfare service for illegal immigrants. On March 24, 2009, the Ministry of Interior ordered a Catholic volunteer who had worked for the school to depart the country. The Government also ended delivery of the group's religious magazines." (United States Department of State (26 October 2009) *International Religious Freedom Report 2009 Algeria*)

Section 1 of a July 2008 *Christian Solidarity Worldwide* report, under the heading 'Executive Summary', notes:

"During 2006 and 2007, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) raised concerns over a new Algerian law entitled "The conditions and rules for the exercise of religious worship other than Islam". This law was adopted in September 2006. In May 2007, two Presidential decrees were issued which established the government committees required to enforce the law. The new law effectively criminalises the basic, internationally recognised rights of freedom of assembly, association, and the freedom to manifest a religion. It also has negative implications for the right of religious minorities engaged in propagating their faith amongst Muslims.

CSW has been concerned over the potential misuse of this law to suppress the rights of the small Christian population in the country. Sadly, these initial reservations have proven justified. The new law has opened the way for Christian leaders to be accused of proselytism and blasphemy, and they have been threatened with imprisonment and monetary fines. It has also led to the closure of ten churches by local authorities. CSW calls upon the international community to press the Algerian government to repeal this law, which contravenes international human right standards; to ensure a fair trial for those currently accused under the new law and to re-open closed churches." (Christian Solidarity Worldwide (1 July 2008) *Algeria - Increasing persecution of Christians*, p.3)

Under the heading 'Recent Developments', the same report continues:

"At the start of 2008, the issue of the growing numbers of Muslim converts to Christianity in Algeria became a widely debated and reported topic in the Algerian media. The reports alleged that Christians had been inducing conversions by providing money and foreign visas and that these actions posed

a grave danger to the nation. Various Muslim groups, politicians and intellectuals have formed committees to 'uncover' Christian activities and have called on the government to respond with strong measures against the Christian churches. This has led to a number of worrying human rights abuses perpetrated against the small Christian population in Algeria.

To date, 25 Protestant churches have been ordered by the local authorities to shut down. Some have been forcibly closed down, while others have shut down of their own accord due to fear of repercussions. All of the attempts by the Protestant churches to engage with the Algerian state in order to resolve the issue have yielded no fruit.

CSW is aware of fourteen Christians who have been charged under the 2006 legislation. They have been charged with shaking the faith of a Muslim, evangelism, possession or improper distribution of Christian materials and holding religious activities in places not designated for such purposes. According to Middle East Concern, four have been acquitted and nine have been given suspended jail sentences and monetary fines. In some of these cases, church leaders were approached by plain-clothed police officers pretending to be interested in the Christian faith. The church leaders were later arrested by them for evangelism. In one case, a Muslim convert to Christianity was arrested and charged just for having a Bible in her hand bag. At the court, she was coerced to return to Islam and ordered to 'search for truth' in addition to being handed a suspended verdict.

Although the 2006 legislation seems to be primarily concerned with church registration issues, its provisions on 'shaking the faith of a Muslim' have begun to be used aggressively against Christians." (ibid, pp. 3-4)

A June 2008 *BBC News* report states:

"Four Algerian Christians have been given suspended jail terms and fines for worshipping illegally.

The case has provoked accusations in the West of religious repression in the largely Muslim country of 33 million - a charge the government denies.

But Christian groups point to the ordered closures of some churches.

The state-appointed Higher Islamic Council said Protestant evangelicals are secretly trying to divide Algerians to colonise the country.

One man, a computer technician, received a six-month suspended jail sentence and a fine of \$3,150.

Three others got lighter penalties, two-month suspended jail terms and half the fine.

The four men admitted they had converted to Christianity but rejected the charge against them - that they were holding an illegal religious ceremony when they were arrested.

Some reports also suggest the men were accused of attempting to convert other Algerians to Christianity.

At least two other high-profile trials of Christian converts are on-going. There are an estimated 10,000 Christians in Algeria.” (BBC News (3 June 2008) *Algerian Christian converts fined*)

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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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