

Church in Sudanese capital flattened by authorities

Country/Region: Sudan, Middle East and North Africa

A church in the capital of Sudan was bulldozed by the authorities as the government pushes forward its plans for a strengthened Islamic state following the country's split from the South.

The Episcopal Parish Church of Saint John was demolished without warning by the local authority's Ministry of Planning and Housing, flanked by police, on the morning of 18 June.

A number of Christian women who were present pleaded with the authorities to allow them to rescue items of church property from the building; they were permitted to retrieve only a few chairs at the end of which time almost everything had been destroyed.

Two girls and a boy were arrested for taking photos of the incident; they were released later that day.

The reasons given by the authorities for the demolition were that the church had no legal documents or status, and that it belonged to Southerners, who they said should no longer be in the country following the independence of South Sudan.

The Bishop of Khartoum, the Rt. Revd. Ezekiel Kondo, challenged both of these reasons saying that the government had refused to grant St John's legal status for the last 25 years – despite several requests from the church – and that it does not, as part of the Episcopal Church of Sudan, whose bishop is Sudanese, belong to Southerners.

He added:

The authorities do not respect the right of non-Muslims in Sudan... It seems that the policy of Islamic state is being implemented when the president said if South Sudanese vote for secession, there will be but one religion, one language and one culture.

The church demolition was denounced by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), who said in a joint statement that it was the latest in a series of "calculated attacks" on minority communities and Christians in particular.

On 21 April, a church and Bible School compound in Khartoum was destroyed in a fire. Two days later, security forces occupied the premises of the Sudan Council of Churches and Sudan Aid in Nyala, Dafur, and confiscated property.

The WCC and AACC warned that Christian converts from a Muslim background in Sudan were being targeted and having their property – and even their spouses – taken from them.

They added:

We express our fears that all these events may not be isolated but rather calculated attacks on Sudanese civilians who are not of the Muslim faith, and their property in Khartoum, and in particular Christians.

President Omar Hassan al-Bashir has repeatedly stated his intention to strengthen sharia law in Sudan, which is 98% Muslim, after the South seceded.

People of Southern origin, who are mainly Christian and mainly African, remaining in the North after the split were stripped of their citizenship and given a deadline to leave Sudan.

It is estimated that 260,000 people remain stranded without the resources to relocate to South Sudan. Many are living in makeshift shelters on the outskirts of Khartoum in an ever perilous situation.



The Church of Saint John was flattened without warning