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SUDAN | Concerns Over Religious Freedom Grow as Lawyer Flees

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is concerned by the continuing deterioration in freedom of religion and belief in Sudan, following reports that a Sudanese lawyer and religious freedom advocate has fled the country after enduring months of pressure and harassment from the authorities.

Morning Star news reports that Nahmia Ibrahim Omer Shaloka, a Christian lawyer who promoted religious freedom in Sudan, fled the country after receiving threats to his life from National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) operatives, who required him to report to their offices daily. He was initially arrested on May 27 at his home in Khartoum by the NISS and interrogated for eight hours, particularly about conducting workshops on religious freedom and reconciliation in Sudan. His personal documentation, computer modem and laptop were also confiscated.

News of Shaloka's flight comes at a time when Sudan's Christians are experiencing continuing repression. Since December 2012, there has been an increase in surveillance, harassment and detentions of local Christians, and the deportations of many foreigners linked to Christian institutions, including several Sudanese Christians who were deported to South Sudan. The authorities have also destroyed church buildings in the Khartoum area, raided religious institutions, and closed down several church-affiliated institutions.

The harassment of Shaloka may herald further restrictions on freedom of religion or belief for followers of minority faiths. The interim constitution recognizes Sudan's multi-ethnic and multi-religious character, with Shari'a law as a source of law. In 2011, President Omar al Bashir announced that following the secession of South Sudan, a new constitution would be drafted based on Shari'a law alone.

The drafting of the new constitution has remained a relatively closed process primarily involving the ruling National Congress Party. In April, the government invited members of the main opposition party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), to join the constitutional drafting committee following calls from the opposition for an opening up of the process. But in October, DUP leader Mohamed Osman al-Mirghani announced the joint committee established to discuss the drafting of the new constitution had been suspended and called for all opposition parties and armed groups to be included in the process. Other key constituencies, such as civil society groups, are yet to be included, raising concerns as to whether the final draft will reflect Sudan's religious, ethnic, social, and political diversity.

In October, during a consultative coordination meeting with the Islamic Council of South Sudan

in Khartoum, state minister at the Ministry of Guidance and Endowments Mohamed Mustafa al-Yakooti described South Sudan's secular system as "positive", commending the fact that Muslims faced no coercion to adopt a particular ideology and were free to proselytize. However, he stopped short of advocating a similar approach toward religious minorities in Sudan.

CSW Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas says "A constitution based on Shari'a Law should be implemented only after a genuine popular consultation and consensus, and exemptions should always be made for those of other faiths. Freedom of religion or belief is a non-derogable right, and the Sudanese Government must uphold it both in practice and in the new constitution. CSW urges the international community to continually hold Sudan to its commitments under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, particularly articles 18, 19, 21 and 22, which guarantee freedom of religion or belief, freedom of association, press freedom and freedom of expression for all of Sudan's citizens."