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SUDAN | Christians Call Off Protest

A protest planned by Sudanese Christians for Dec. 22 against the illegal sale of church property in Khartoum has been called off amidst reports that the authorities plan to seize the property on that day. A separate protest by the Alliance of Democratic Lawyers in Sudan will take place as planned.

On Dec. 8, lawyers representing the Anglican Church in Sudan and 12 tenants in one of the church's properties in Omdurman lodged a constitutional appeal after the property was sold to a Muslim businessman, despite the church having had control of the property since 1956. Instead of awaiting the outcome of the court case, the police reportedly plan to clear the land of remaining church property and seize it Dec. 22. Consequently, instead of handing over a letter of protest at the presidential palace as originally planned, protestors will hold a vigil at the premises.

Also on Dec. 22, the Alliance of Democratic Lawyers in Sudan will hold a protest outside the senior court of Khartoum, calling for the release of two prominent lawyers. Faroug Abo Issa, leader of the National Consensus Forces (NCF), and Dr. Amin Maki Madani, chair of the Civil Society Initiative and president of the Alliance of Democratic Lawyers in Sudan, were arrested separately Jan. 6 by the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) in Khartoum after returning from Addis Ababa, where they had joined other opposition parties and Sudanese rebel movements in signing the Sudan Appeal, a joint communiqué calling for an end to one party rule and for democratic restructuring.

Today's protest is the second organized by the Alliance of Democratic Lawyers on behalf of the two lawyers. They have not been formally charged. Neither has been allowed to access lawyers or visitors, and there are growing concerns for their health and welfare.

The protests are occurring four months ahead of Sudan's general election and at a time when there have been considerable efforts by the Sudanese authorities to restrict freedom of expression, association and freedom of religion or belief, including church demolitions and the confiscation of church land without compensation. On June 30, Sudanese authorities demolished the Church of Christ in Thiba Al Hamyida, North Khartoum after giving the church's leaders 24 hours notice of the action. In November and December, Sudanese security services demolished parts of Bahri Evangelical Church in North Khartoum under a court order to secure the property, as it allegedly belonged to a private investor. On Dec. 2, armed police attacked the premises and church members, who had been holding a protest vigil at the site since Nov. 18, were severely beaten and arrested. While some were released soon afterwards, others were only freed after paying a fine.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, "CSW joins Christians in Sudan calling for an end to illegal seizures of church-owned properties. Freedom of religion or belief, as guaranteed by the Sudanese constitution, includes property rights and we urge the Sudanese government to uphold the rule of law by ensuring these are respected. We also call for the immediate and unconditional release of Faroug Abo Issa and Dr. Amin Maki Madani and an end to the harassment of human rights defenders and other members of civil society. The arbitrary arrests without charge and continued incommunicado detentions not only violate their rights as Sudanese citizens under the constitution, but are also in violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Sudan is a signatory. We call on the international community, and in particular the African Union, to hold Sudan to its international obligations, which include upholding freedom of religion or belief, freedom of expression and of association, and ending arbitrary detention."