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## **SUDAN | Lawyers Appeal Court Order to Close Church**

Lawyers representing the Khartoum Bahri Evangelical Church in North Khartoum are due to lodge an appeal today against a court decision to confiscate the remaining property at the site and permanently close the church.

On Feb. 18, police arrived at the church with an order from the Khartoum Civil Court to lock and seize the outer gates of the property. Lawyers representing the church issued a technical challenge on the wording of the order, as it does not identify the specific area of the church's property affected by the order.

The Bahri Evangelical Church is part of the Sudan Evangelical Presbyterian Church (SEPC) denomination and is in an ongoing legal battle with the Sudanese authorities, who have attempted to sell church land to a Muslim businessman. In November 2014, congregants held a protest vigil in order to prevent NISS agents from gaining access to the land and illegally destroying and confiscating the property. In December 2014, the church was partially destroyed and 37 congregants arrested.

The government maintains the land was legally sold to the Muslim businessman by a church committee. Church leaders later discovered a secondary committee, backed by the government and formed in contravention of the SEPC's administrative processes, had entered into a contract with the Muslim businessman. On Jan. 6, a court ruled in favor of the legitimate church committee, but this ruling was later overturned by the Supreme Court on appeal.

The Sudanese authorities also attempted to illegally sell other properties belonging to the SEPC. In December 2014, lawyers lodged a constitutional appeal after the Ministry of Justice issued a one week eviction notice to the church's tenants. The chairman of the SEPC council responsible for church buildings and land, Rafat Obid, has faced a campaign of harassment by the NISS as a result of his work on the committee.

On Dec. 21, 2014, Rev. Yat Michael, a South Sudanese pastor from the South Sudan Evangelical Presbyterian Church (SSEPC) who preached at the Khartoum Bahri Evangelical Church, was arrested by NISS agents. A second minister, Rev. Peter Lein Reith, was arrested Jan. 11. Both men are still detained incommunicado in Khartoum.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, "CSW is deeply concerned by these developments. The questionable legal avenues utilized by the Sudanese authorities to confiscate property belonging to the Khartoum Bahri Evangelical Church and other properties belonging to the SEPC are a clear attempt to financially weaken the Church and precipitate its permanent closure. These actions are in clear violation of Article 6 of Sudan's

constitution, Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and Article 8 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (ACHPR), which guarantee the right to freedom of religion or belief, and to which Sudan is a signatory. The court order will effectively facilitate the illegal closure of yet another church at a time when the government has stated that the construction of new churches will no longer be permitted. We call upon the international community, and in particular the African Union, to hold Sudan to its obligations to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief and to guarantee the profession and free practice of religion as outlined in international statutes to which the nation is party.”