



5.5.15

SUDAN | Clergymen Brought Before Criminal Court

Rev. Yat Michael and Rev. Peter Reith, South Sudanese clergymen from the Presbyterian Evangelical Church (SSPEC), were brought before Khartoum Bahri Criminal Court in Khartoum, Sudan on May 4.

During the hearing, the clergymen were charged jointly with undermining the constitutional system (Article 50 of the Sudanese Penal Code); waging war against the state (Article 51); disclosure and receipt of official information or documents (Article 55); arousing feelings of discontent among regular forces (Article 62); breach of public peace (Article 69); and offences relating to insulting religious beliefs (Article 125). Of the five charges, Articles 50 and 51 carry the death penalty or life imprisonment in the event of a guilty verdict.

A subsequent hearing is set for May 14.

Michael has been in detention since Dec. 14, 2014, while Reith has been detained since Jan. 11. Both were held by the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) without charge or access to a lawyer or their families until March 1 when they were transferred to the custody of the Attorney General. While in the Attorney General's custody, the two men were given access to legal representation and family visits.

Michael was arrested shortly after making a speech at the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church (SPEC) Khartoum Bahri congregation. The church has been in a land dispute with private investors supported by the government. At the time of his arrest, NISS agents reportedly stated they were offended by Michael's speech encouraging the church to continue standing firm through the trials they were experiencing.

The Sudanese authorities 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, faced a campaign of harassment by the NISS as a result of his work on the committee.

The severe charges levelled against Michael and Reith are the latest development in a series of repressive official actions targeting Christians in Sudan.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are gravely concerned by the initiation of a criminal case against Rev. Michael and Rev. Reith. It is unacceptable that after enduring extended detention without charge, these men now face extreme and unwarranted charges, some of which could entail the death penalty or life imprisonment. The levelling of such serious

charges is an indication that the Sudanese authorities intend to continue restricting the rights of religious minorities in Sudan. We call upon the recently elected government to uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief, as guaranteed by the Sudanese constitution and Sudan's international human rights obligations, and to guarantee enjoyment of that right without discrimination. We also urge the international community, in particular the African Union, to hold Sudan accountable for its obligation to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief for all within its borders, and for ensuring justice for the two clergymen.”