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## **SUDAN | Defense Closes Case in Pastors' Trial**

The defense team in the trial of South Sudanese pastors Rev. Yat Michael and Rev. Peter Reith closed their case on July 14 after presenting two witnesses at the hearing in Khartoum, Sudan.

One of the witnesses was ex-army general and 2010 presidential candidate Abdul Aziz Khalid, who testified that the evidence presented by the prosecution was available to civilians and not classified; therefore the security and espionage charges against the pastors were without basis.

The pastors were charged with at least six crimes including undermining the constitutional system (Article 50); espionage (Article 53); promoting hatred amongst sects (Article 64); breach of public peace (Article 69); and offences relating to insulting religious beliefs (Article 125). Of the charges, Articles 50 and 53 carry the death penalty or life imprisonment in the event of a guilty verdict.

The next hearing is scheduled for July 23, when the judge will hear closing statements. The verdict is expected on Aug. 5.

The pastors were once again denied access to their legal team ahead of the hearing, despite an earlier direction from the judge that they would be allowed 15 minutes with their lawyers. At the last hearing on July 2, the judge permitted the defense team 15 minutes with the pastors in order to prepare their case. The pastors' lack of access to their families and legal team is an ongoing concern. Despite repeated requests to the court and prison service, neither the pastors' legal team nor their families have been given permission to visit them in Kober Prison.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "Today the court heard from a prominent expert witness that there is no basis for the charges against the pastors. We therefore renew our call for these unwarranted and extreme charges to be dropped and for Rev. Yat Michael and Rev. Peter Reith to be released unconditionally and without further delay. The ongoing denial of access to the pastors' legal team is unacceptable and in violation of fair trial principles, as articulated in Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Sudan is a party. The denial of family visits is a further measure to increase their mental and emotional distress; a cruel and unjust action on the part of the State. We urge the African Union in particular, and the wider international community, to challenge Sudan on its treatment of the pastors and its failure to protect and promote freedom of religion or belief and the right to a fair trial."