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## **SUDAN | Evangelical Presbyterian Church Facing Relentless Official Interference**

The Sudan Evangelical Presbyterian Church (SEPC) is facing interference in its internal affairs from the government ministry responsible for religious affairs in Sudan, which has refused to allow the denomination's land and buildings committee to act on its behalf despite a court order recognizing its legitimacy.

In March 2013, an illegally-convened lands and buildings committee was recognized by the Ministry of Guidance and Endowments as the official group charged with administering the SEPC's affairs and was subsequently involved in the unlawful sale of church property to Muslim businessmen. On April 3, the illegal committee elected new members and renewed the terms of older ones, in violation of an August 2015 ruling by the Khartoum Administrative Court overturning the Ministry's' March 2013 decision.

Despite the legal ruling in its favor, the legitimate committee, chaired by Rafat Obid, was unable to resume its work without recognition from the Ministry of Guidance and Endowments. If the recent elections are recognized by the Ministry of Guidance and Endowments, this will nullify the August 2015 ruling as the committee referred to in this judgment no longer exists in the same form. The church will then need to make fresh applications for a new judgement.

In the week prior to the election, Pastor Daniel Weliam, secretary of the legitimate SEPC lands and buildings committee, was detained for three days. A week earlier, 16 leaders and elders were summoned to the local police station, held for questioning and released later on the same day. An arrest warrant was reportedly issued for Obid but has not been executed.

Since the elections, the illegal committee has stated its intention to sell all remaining SEPC property, including church buildings and schools, which would effectively close down church operations. In addition, an unnamed member of the committee claimed in the local media that Christians who complain of persecution merely seek to undermine Sudan's image internationally because in reality their rights and freedoms are fully guaranteed.

These developments occur at a time when church leaders in Khartoum and Omdurman are facing a campaign of repression that some feel is designed to pressure members of the community into leaving the country. Six clergymen and two lay members from three denominations have been arrested by the National Intelligence and Security Services since December 2015.

Those arrested include Christian activist and member of the Khartoum Bahri Church, Talahon Nigosi Kassa Ratta. Ratta was involved in organizing protests against government interference with SEPC property. He was arrested Dec. 15, 2015 and permitted one visit from his family at the end of December 2015 at Kober prison. He has since been moved and remains in detention without charge.

Following Ratta's arrest, Rev. Hassan Abduraheem of the Sudan Church of Christ was arrested Dec. 19, 2015 at his home. He remains detained in an unknown location without charge or access to a lawyer or his family. His wife is particularly concerned for his health as he suffers from stomach ulcers. She has regularly submitted requests to visit him, but they have not been granted.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "We are concerned to learn of the appointment of yet another committee, in violation of church procedures and the court ruling. This development appears to be part of an ongoing effort aimed not only at seizing property belonging to the SEPC, but also at closing it down completely. We urge the Minister of Guidance and Endowments, Dr. Ammar Mirghani Hussein Mohammed, to ensure that the ministry complies with the court's decision and recognizes the legitimacy of the committee chaired by Mr. Obid. Furthermore, we call for an end to the campaign of harassment targeting church leaders and members, and for the immediate and unconditional release of Rev. Abduraheem and Mr. Ratta. Their detention for over three months without charge, and without regular access to their families or a legal representative amounts to arbitrary detention and violates the principles of fair trial articulated in article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Sudan is party."