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## **SUDAN | Church Members Arrested**

Members of the Khartoum Bahri Evangelical Church were arrested twice on July 7, after protesting against the sale of the church's training school.

The first arrests took place on the morning of July 7, when security officials arrived at the Sudan Evangelical Presbyterian Church training school with orders to seize and lock the building. The school is part of the Khartoum Bahri Evangelical Church's property and is the subject of a long-running dispute between the church's land and buildings committee and an illegally-convened rival church committee backed by the government, which authorized the seizure. The school is used by church members for classes and meetings; however, the illegally-convened committee has prevented access to sections of the school building by issuing a long-term lease on a part of it to a third party.

On arriving at the premises on July 7, security officials told the church members to vacate the building immediately. Church members received no prior notification of the order and questioned the security officials' authority to seize the building. The officials summoned the police to arrest the church members, and 10 men and a woman were transferred to Khartoum Bahri Police Station where they were charged with "breaching the public peace" and "nuisance" under Articles 69 and 77 of the Criminal Code. The group was released on bail several hours later.

As news of the arrests spread, leaders and members of the Khartoum Bahri Evangelical Church congregation went to the training school and found the building had been locked by the security officials. In protest, the group, which included the 11 released on bail, broke the locks and entered the building. The police returned and arrested 17 people, including six members on bail and two clergymen. The group was taken to Khartoum Bahri Police Station, where three people were immediately released upon confirming their membership of the illegally-convened committee and the remaining 14 were charged with "breaching the public peace" and "nuisance" under Articles 69 and 77 of the Criminal Code. Lawyers representing the church secured bail and were assured the 14 would be released late on July 7. They are still imprisoned.

The incident provides further evidence of state interference in church affairs. It is believed the training school was seized in order to facilitate rental or sale to investors by the illegally-

convened church land and buildings committee, which in May 2016 was authorized to administrate on behalf of the denomination by the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Guidance, the government body responsible for religious affairs in Sudan. This authorization was in violation of a court order that favored the church's legitimate committee, chaired by senior church member Mr. Rafat Obid.

On May 8, Obid was falsely charged with impersonation, forgery and criminal misappropriation and is currently awaiting trial while on bail. The order for his arrest came from the Ministry of Guidance and Endowments. In April, the Committee Secretary Pastor Daniel Weliam was detained for three days without charge. Earlier, 16 church leaders and elders were questioned by police.

The recent arrests occur at a time when the Christian communities in Khartoum and Omdurman are facing a campaign of repression that appears designed to pressurize them into leaving the country. In another example of harassment, Reverends Hassan Abdulraheem and Kuwa Shamal remain in the custody of the attorney general without being formally charged while the prosecutor continues his criminal investigation.

Dr. Khataza Gondwe CSW's Africa and Middle East Team Leader said "CSW calls for the immediate release from police custody of the leaders and members of Khartoum Bahri Evangelical Church and the dropping of all charges levelled against them. It is unacceptable that they are being penalized for peacefully protesting the illegal seizure of church-owned property. The continued refusal by the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Guidance to recognize the church's legitimate land and buildings committee is further indication of an ongoing campaign of harassment and an unwarranted interference in church affairs. We urge the international community, in particular the African Union, to hold Sudan to its international obligations, including its undertakings to promote, respect and protect the right to freedom of religion or belief and the rights to freedom of association and assembly, as articulated in articles 8, 10 and 11 of the African Charter on People's and Human Rights."