Christian Pastors Face Death Penalty if Convicted in Sudan

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Last December, two evangelical pastors from the Church of Christ in Sudan were taken from their churches and thrown into jail. Last month, the Rev. Abdulraheem Kodi and the Rev. Kuwa Shamal Abu Zumam were charged with numerous offenses, including waging war against the state, espionage and undermining Sudan’s constitutional system.

Their trial has begun. They could get the death penalty if they're found guilty.

Two other men, Czech pastor Petr Jasek and Darfuri human rights activist Abduelmoneim Abdulmwlla, have also been detained. They, too, are accused of conspiring against the state, provoking hatred against or among sects and spreading false information.

Kodi and Zumam hail from the Nuba Mountains, a region that continues to be bombed and brazenly targeted by Sudan’s president, Omar al-Bashir, in what human rights and Christian groups say is an effort to rid the country of the Nuba people — indigenous groups who do not fit the regime’s vision of an Islamic nation and are accused of supporting anti-government rebels.

Bishop of Kadugli Diocese, Reverend Andudu Adam Elnail – who is now based in South Carolina after fleeing Sudan in 2011 after government forces allegedly burned down his property when he refused to use his extensive church leadership outreach to endorse the President – told FoxNews.com.

Al-Bashir, the first sitting head of state to be indicted by the International Criminal Court — there is an outstanding warrant for his arrest in connection to war crimes in Darfur — took power in a 1989 coup and has long taken a stance of “one language (Arabic), one religion (Islam).”

Sudan’s National Intelligence and Security Services have accused the pastors of exposing state secrets. But their defenders say the claims against them have been concocted, and that they are being persecuted by al-Bashir and the Sudanese government. They are appealing desperately to the international community to intervene.

“We call for their protection and immediate release and urge that the U.N., U.S. government – including Congress – and other world communities demand the freedom of these two men of God and other prisoners,” said the Rev. Andudu Adam Elnail, bishop of Kadugli Diocese.

Elnail fled from Sudan five years ago after he refused to endorse al-Bashir and government forces allegedly burned down his property. Now based in South Carolina, he said Kodi and Zumam are in solitary confinement and are not allowed visits or phone calls with family members. He described Zumam whom he has known for many years, as a “humble and good man” in his mid-40s, a father of seven who has dedicated his life to family and faith.

“The government is not interested in the Christian religion. There is no freedom for us, we cannot build churches, we are treated as second-class citizens,” Elnail lamented. “We need the international community to pressure the government of Sudan to give us our freedom of religion.”

“The pastors are accused of sharing evidence of the government burning down churches in Khartoum and bombing churches in the Nuba Mountains,” said Philip Tutu, a native of the Nuba Mountains, who now resides in the U.S and advocates for the rights of the Nuba people.

“The government says its security policy is to keep this information confidential to avoid pressure from the international community.

“Clearly, the pastors are unfairly targeted. The hearings are postponed repeatedly. A lot of people are showing up for the hearings and not everyone is able to attend, including some attorneys for the pastors.”

The attorneys, who asked not to be identified, fearing government retaliation, stressed that more action is needed to support the pastors and to protect Christians in the Nuba Mountains, where they are deemed to be “atheists.”

A spokesperson from the U.S State Department said senior officials at the U.S Embassy in Khartoum have been tracking this case since the pastors were arrested and have repeatedly raised concerns about the matter.

“We are committed to working with countries to make tangible improvements in respect for religious freedom and continue to look for opportunities to address these issues with the government of South Sudan,” the spokesperson said.

Christian persecution is nothing new in war-torn Sudan, where churches are routinely razed and church leaders are targeted and taunted. And though Sudan has been designated a “Country of Particular Concern” by the U.S. State Department since 1999, the situation has worsened.

“Members of Sudan’s minority Christian community have been arrested, their religious buildings attacked, churches and educational institutions closed and their religious literature confiscated,” said the Rev. Thomas J. Reese, S.J, chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

“The government will no longer issue permits for the building of new churches. Government policies and societal pressure promote conversion to Islam. Christians are pressured to deny their faith or convert to gain employment.”

Kiri Kankhwende, of the U.K-based advocacy group Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said the situation for Christians in Sudan has particularly deteriorated since the secession in 2011 of South Sudan, which was [championed](http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/04/19/once-seen-as-white-house-triumph-new-nation-south-sudan-descends-into-war-misery.html) as a foreign policy success story by the Obama administration but has since descended into civil war.

“Since then, the government has called for a 100 percent Islamic nation with a constitution based wholly on Shariah law,” Kankhwende told [FoxNews.com](http://foxnews.com/). “The restrictions placed on Christians over the last five years indicate that the government is moving toward this goal.”

Amnesty International issued a [joint letter](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__www.defenddefenders.org_2016_09_letter-2D33-2Dngos-2Dindividuals-2Dregarding-2Dhuman-2Drights-2Dsituation-2Dsudan-2Dadvance-2D33rd-2Dsession-2Dun-2Dhuman-2Drights-2Dcouncil_&d=DQMFAg&c=cnx1hdOQtepEQkpermZGwQ&r=-uTq6D6O6F5Wts8cOMyxM2qzJBCOQ5B4U5B-d2d9fKY&m=hSr8Eo5ffn78kSBjmVj4OTPTrS4b4PLfvZjJb807J9w&s=HHjl-MbLlrONvWgvCFWCZQXOdxYVOSnACh0LghPf2NY&e=) to the United Nations Human Rights Council this month condemning the lack of freedom of religion in Sudan and calling on the government to release all individuals who have been arbitrarily detained. The independent Sudanese Human Rights and Development Organization has appealed to Pope Francis to exert his influence on Khartoum to help the jailed church leaders.

Open Doors USA, a Christian human rights organization, has called the persecution of Christians in Sudan akin to “ethnic cleansing” and stressed that the “right kind of attention” in the case of the Sudanese priests is vital.

“The more influential voices that can be heard on this issue, the more likely the government of Sudan is to at least consider objections to this miscarriage of justice,” said Open Doors president and CEO David Curry.

The Embassy of the Republic of Sudan in Washington, D.C., could not be reached for comment. The pastors’ trial is set to resume Wednesday.