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Christian jailed in Afghanistan to face judge on Sunday

Imprisoned since May, father of six has yet to learn charges against him

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct (16.11.2010) / HRWF (18.11.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - An Afghani amputee in prison for his Christian faith since May will face a judge this Sunday (Nov. 21) without legal representation or knowledge of the charges against him, according to local sources.

Authorities arrested Said Musa, 45, on May 31, days after the local Noorin TV station broadcast images of Afghan Christians being baptized and worshiping. Though there were other arrests in May and June during the ensuing man-hunt against Christians, Musa is the only known Christian facing a court case.

Turning from Islam is a capital offence under strict Islamic laws still in place in Afghanistan, which was wrested from the Taliban regime's hard-line Islamist control in 2001.

The subject of Afghans leaving Islam for Christianity became national news following the Noorin TV broadcast and ignited a heated debate in the country's parliament and senate. In early June, the deputy secretary of the Afghan parliament, Abdul Sattar Khawasi, called for the execution of converts.

"Those Afghans that appeared on this video film should be executed in public," he said, according to news sources. "The house should order the attorney general and the NDS [National Directorate of Security] to arrest these Afghans and execute them."

In June authorities forced Musa to renounce Christianity publicly on television but have continued to hold him in prison without revealing accusations against him. In prison, Musa has openly said he is a follower of Jesus.

In a hand-delivered letter penned last month to the church worldwide, U.S. President Barack Obama and the heads of NATO's International Security Assistance Forces, Musa wrote that he was physically and verbally abused by his captors and other prisoners at Ouliat Prison in Kabul.

In broken English, he wrote: "I am very and very in a bad condition in the jail," and elsewhere in the letter, "I am alone between 400 of terrible wolves in the jail, like a sheep."

In the two-page letter, a copy of which Compass received in late October, Musa addressed Obama as "brother" and pleaded with the international community: "For [the] sake [of the] Lord Jesus Christ please pray for me and rescue me from this jail otherwise they will kill me because I know they [have] very very very cruel and hard hearts."

Musa wrote of being sexually abused, beaten, mocked, spat on and deprived of sleep because of his faith in Jesus. He wrote that he would be willing to suffer for his faith in order to encourage and strengthen other Christians in their faith.

Musa also described how he had repented for denying his faith publicly: "I acknowledge my sin before [the] Lord Jesus Christ: 'Don't refuse me before your holy angels and before your father because I am a very very weak and [sinful] man.'"

In his letter, Musa alluded to the lack of justice he faced in prison, saying that the prosecutor had given the judge a false report about him and demanded a bribe from the Christian.

Integrity Watch Afghanistan, an anti-corruption monitor, recently reported that corruption in Afghanistan is rampant and has doubled since 2007. Most Afghans polled in its 2010 report said that state corruption was fueling the Taliban's growth. Bribes are frequently required for everything from health care to dealing with state bureaucracy.

Prison Transfer

Days after the letter was circulated, quiet diplomacy resulted in authorities transferring Musa to a different prison, to keep him separate from prisoners who would likely abuse him for his faith. He is now held at the Kabul Detention Center in the Governor's Compound.

A state-assigned lawyer has refused to represent him because of his faith. No other lawyer has been willing to represent him, though he has sought legal help.

Musa, known as Dr. Musa, has worked for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Kabul for 15 years fitting people for prosthetic limbs. He also has a prosthetic leg. Married and the father of six young children, he has been a Christian for eight years. His name is also phonetically spelled Sayed Mossa.

For the first two months of his detainment, sources said, Musa's employer and family could not find out where authorities were holding him. During that time his wife received threats that she must leave Musa. Authorities have so far denied his family access to his file, which includes the charges against him. It is believed that the charges could include apostasy and possibly espionage.

Local Christians and religious freedom monitors have expressed concern that Musa may be made an example.

"The court case against Said Musa is unique," said one religious freedom advocate, a Christian, under condition of anonymity. "Authorities usually don't want court cases against Christians. This is high profile, as Musa has been on TV and was put under pressure to deny his faith publicly. This is a kind of a test case to see which law prevails in the country: sharia [Islamic law] or international agreements."

Afghanistan's population is estimated at 29 million, with very few Christians among them. Afghan converts from Islam are not accepted or recognized by the predominantly Muslim society. In recent months experts have expressed concern over political threats against local Christians, and many, including those exposed by Noorin TV's broadcast, have fled the country. Christians who remain are afraid, according to sources.

"Dozens of Afghan Christians left their homes, as the authorities were actively looking for Christians after the television programs," said the religious freedom monitor.

In the face of societal stigmatization, Christians who dare to meet do so in small groups at homes. Sources report that since the hostilities in May and June, Afghan Christians are very intimidated.

Afghanistan ranks sixth on Christian support organization Open Doors' World Watch List of countries where Christians are persecuted.

The country has signed the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulating religious freedom, and the nation's constitution also provides a measure of religious liberties under Article 2. Article 3 limits the application of all laws if they are contrary to the "beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam."

"It seems that this measure of religious freedom does not apply to those who have turned away from Islam," said the religious freedoms monitor. "They are seen as apostates, traitors of their faith and country."

Aid groups suspended in Afghanistan amid proselytizing probe

RFE/RL (31.05.2010) / HRWF (01.06.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Afghanistan says it has suspended the activities of two foreign aid groups after local television said they were promoting Christianity.

The Economy Ministry said Norwegian Church Aid and World Church Services were under investigation for proselytizing.

Proselytizing for any religion but Islam is against the law in Afghanistan. Those found to be promoting Christianity or any other non-Muslim creed can face the death penalty.

Meanwhile, parliament unanimously passed a resolution today calling for the closure of all NGOs and aid groups found to be promoting Christianity, RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan reports.

The parliament asked for harsh actions to be taken against those who violate Afghanistan's Constitution.

The speaker of the lower house of parliament, Mohammad Yunos Qanuni, called for the Afghan government to investigate the matter. He asked that parliament be given enough documentation to take further action.

The report on the NGOs was aired by Afghanistan's local Nurin television. The station is owned by an Afghan businessman, Haji Arif, who is believed to be close to Qanuni.
