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KENYA: CHURCH STRUGGLING AFTER ISLAMISTS DESTROY BUILDING

Six months after attack, Muslim assailants still at large; weary congregation faces heat, rain.



GARISSA, Kenya, March 5 (Compass Direct News) – Six months after a gang of Muslim youths ruined a church building in this town in northern Kenya, Christians still worshipping in the sweltering heat of the open air say they feel disillusioned that officials have done nothing to punish the culprits or restore their structure.

On a sunny afternoon last Sept. 14, when angry Muslim youths threw more than 400 members of the Redeemed Gospel Church out of their church building, the Christians hoped they would be able to return to the ruins of their former structure. That hope is quickly giving way to anger, hopelessness and despair.

"After six months in the open, the church feels tired and cheated," said pastor David Matolo. "We are fed up with the empty promises from the government administration."

Church still meeting in open air

He said the church, which began worshipping in Garissa in early 2001 with only a dozen members, is fast shrinking.

"Our church membership has decreased, which is of great concern to me," he told Compass. "The church thinks that the government has decided to buy time – almost every month I do book appointments with the relevant authorities, who on several occasions have given us a deaf ear."

Since the attack, church members have been meeting at the town show grounds. Just a few miles from the Somali border, the site has few trees to protect the congregation from the scorching sun, with temperatures ranging from 92 to 104 degrees F (30 to 40 degrees C).

Asked why he thought government officials were reluctant to grant the church a permanent place of worship as promised, an irritated Matolo did not hesitate to reply.

"The administration has decided, '*kutesa* [inflict pain on us],' always making promises that never come to pass," he said. "At times the provincial commissioner deliberately decides not to take my phone calls. I have had a painful experience."

Matolo said he has asked the administration either to allow the church to build a new structure on land lying idle near a police training college or to let them return to their original site. "We are ready for any eventuality," he said. "We feel that the administration is not concerned about our spiritual welfare."

Asked about the pastor's complaints, provincial police officer Stephen Chelimo told Compass, "The issue at the moment is not within my docket, but wholly rests upon the provincial commissioner."

But Provincial Commissioner Stephen Maingi said the onus rested on the district commissioner. "Let the district commissioner sort this issue with the pastor," Maingi said.

District Commissioner Onyango Ogango, in turn, indicated the church itself was the source of problems.

"If the church is allowed to return to their original site, we will expect a fight to erupt with the Muslims," Ogango said. "Earlier on, the church began very well during its initial stage of inception with controlled worship, but later it turned out to hold noisy prayers and loud songs."

Further questioned about these allegations, however, Ogango said he would call the pastor to discuss a resolution. Even so, Matolo said previous contact with the district commissioner did not leave him with high expectations.



Bangladesh - Muslim Pilgrims Beat Bible Student



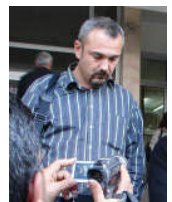
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"Our district commissioner seemed to have no feelings for our predicament," he said. "The faces of the congregation members speak a lot."

A glance at the worshippers confirmed his appraisal. They looked weary and anxious, with impending April rains expected to add to the indignity of their situation. Matolo said his congregation feels that soon it will be difficult to worship at all.

Even a temporary home did not appear to be forthcoming. The pastor said their request for a site near the provincial commissioner's residence was dismissed on the grounds that it would create a security concern.

Radical Islamic Influence

Tensions between Christians and the Muslim-majority population in the semi-desert town of 20,000 people began in June 2007, when Muslims built a mosque too close to the church building – only three meters separated the two structures.

Matolo said pleas to District Commissioner Ogango did nothing to reverse the encroachment of Muslim worshippers.

Land issues alone have not been responsible for tensions in the area. The Rev. Ibrahim Kamwaro, chairman of the Pastors' Fellowship in Garissa, said Matolo had offended Muslims when he preached to a lame Muslim man. Muslims were said to be upset that the pastor persuaded the disabled man to stop going to the mosque and instead join his church.

Matolo's alleged promise to the disabled man of a better life offended area Muslims, Rev. Kamwaro said.

Christians feel increasingly hunted and haunted as the spread of Islamic extremism is fast gaining ground in this town, located about 400 kilometers (249 miles) from Nairobi, the capital. In neighboring Somalia, newly elected President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed on Feb. 28 offered the introduction of *sharia* (Islamic law) in exchange for a truce with a rebel extremist group said to have ties to al Qaeda, al Shabaab; the rebels said they would keep fighting. Many fear that Muslim youths in this lawless part of Kenya will be tempted to adopt the radical, uncompromising posture of the fighters.

To date, the gang of more than 50 Muslim youths who attacked worshippers and brought their church to ruins have not been apprehended. Members of the congregation feel justice is increasingly elusive.

In Garissa, Muslims restrict churches in other ways. Christians are not allowed to pray, sing or use musical instruments in rented homes owned by Muslims. No teaching of Christian Religious Education in schools is allowed; only Islamic Religious Knowledge is taught.

Garissa has more than 15 Christian denominations, including the East Africa Pentecostal Church, the Redeemed Gospel Church, the Anglican Church, Deliverance Church, Full Gospel Churches of Kenya and the African Inland Church.

END

*** Photos of the congregation meeting in the open air, the ruined church building and the Rev. Ibrahim Kamwaro are available electronically. Contact Compass Direct News for pricing and transmittal.

Case Aids Probe of 'Deep State' Criminals



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