

I.I.S.I.C. BULLETIN

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SAUDI ARABIA

A CALL FOR RECIPROCITY

"As far as I am aware. Christians in Saudi Arabia enjoy an equal standing in society with the Muslims. and have equal access to the comforts of life available in the country, as long as they respect its laws."

Thus wrote Omar Al-Hassan on 27 April 1993 in a letter to *The Times*. Mr Al-Hassan, who describes himself as a moderate Muslim, was Arab League Ambassador to the United Kingdom from 1976 to 1983. In his letter he challenges the *Times* columnist Bernard Levin to "provide one proven example of the discrimination against and maltreatment of Christians living in Saudi Arabia which he describes [in an article published in *The Times* on 27 April 1993]."

How accurate is Mr Al-Hassan's perception of the status of Christians in Saudi Arabia?

According to a report by Amnesty International published in May this year, more than 300 Christians, including women and children, have been arrested in Saudi Arabia since 1991. They have been detained, most without charge or trial, solely for the peaceful expression of their religious beliefs. Scores have been tortured, some by flogging, while in detention.

In October 1992, an Egyptian carpenter and member of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Mikhail Cornelius Mikhail, was arrested for blasphemy, a charge which he denied. He was convicted and sentenced to seven years imprisonment and 1,000 lashes. On 31 January he was released and deported to Egypt, having received 500 lashes, administered over a 10-week period.

Not only does Saudi Arabia officially forbid church buildings but also any form of Christian worship, whether public or private. Bibles, Christian literature and Christian objects such as crosses, rosaries, or pictures of Jesus are also prohibited and subject to confiscation. Christians are not allowed to enter Mecca or Medina, the two most important Muslim sites, both of which are within Saudi Arabia's borders. The reason for this is that the presence of non-Muslims would desecrate these holy places. (King Fahd of Saudi Arabia uses the title "The Servant of the Two Holy Shrines".)

Apostasy from Sunni Islam is a capital offence. Executions are carried out by beheading with a sharp sword for men and usually by firing squad for women.

What does all this say to Omar Al-Hassan's assertion that Christians enjoy an equal standing in Saudi society with Muslims and are not discriminated against or maltreated? Saudi laws manifestly prevent Christians from freely practising their religion in the way that Muslims can. Ali ben Hassan, the minister for information, acknowledged as much recently when he told the French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, that the Saudi government "regrets" that it cannot tolerate churches within her borders, but this is "a commandment from Allah".

What is the situation of Saudi Muslims in western countries? Do they suffer the same restrictions and harassment as Christians in Saudi Arabia? There is certainly no equivalent prohibition on places of worship, for many mosques exist all over western Europe and North America. There are no prohibitions on importing, selling or printing Qur'ans or other Islamic religious materials. There are no prohibitions on Islamic mission, on the

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teaching of Islam in universities or on the creation of Islamic institutes.

For example, King Fahd has recently donated \$5 million to establish a centre for the study of Shari'ah (Islamic law) at the Harvard University Law School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This donation will establish an endowed professorship with the title of "The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" and a research fund to advance scholarly studies in Shari'ah and the Islamic legal system. (Of course, no non-Muslim American would be allowed to visit the two holy mosques referred to.)

Europe's first Islamic theological school has opened in Saint-Leger-de-Fougeret, 175 miles south of Paris. In Britain, Prince Charles has agreed to be patron of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, which was established in 1985 as an associated institution of Oxford University. Its aims are to encourage research and learning concerned with the study of all aspects of Islamic tradition and Muslim societies.

If Muslims are free to establish Islamic places of worship and centres of learning within the West, why cannot Saudi Arabia reciprocate with similar freedoms for Christians within her borders? Prince Charles, who is due to become the next head of the Church of England, has agreed to be associated with a centre for the study of Islamic tradition and Muslim societies. Why cannot Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, who in all likelihood will succeed his brother King Fahd as "Protector of the Two Holy Shrines", similarly endorse a Christian institute in Saudi Arabia? If Saudi Muslims want to take advantage of the freedoms of the West, they should be willing to give the same freedoms to non-Muslims in Saudi territory.

Write to your Saudi ambassador and ask for reciprocity between the treatment of Muslims in the West and the treatment of Christians in Saudi Arabia. The ambassador to Britain is Ghazi Algozaibi,

Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, 30 Charles Street, London W1X 7PN

ETHIOPIA

ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM IN ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia is one of the target areas for Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East and Horn of Africa. Geographically it is a key piece of territory in fundamentalist long-term plans to create a pan-Islamic "nation" stretching from the Atlantic through Africa and the Middle East to Malaysia and beyond. If the fundamentalists succeed in gaining ground in Ethiopia, it will serve as a springboard for the spread of fundamentalism into the rest of the Horn of Africa and East Africa. The existing economic and political situation in Ethiopia - poverty, ethnic conflict and a weak central government - is conducive to the rapid spread of Islam.

Government links with fundamentalists

The ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front was formerly financed by various Arab nations, so tends to favour Islam. President Meles seeks good relations with rich Muslim countries such as Libya, Saudi Arabia and Iran. As in many parts of the world Saudi Arabia and Iran are vying for dominance, but it is with Iran, through the help of Sudan, that the government is developing its closest links. It is interesting that in March 1993 the first group of graduates from the Abadir Islamic Institute in Addis Ababa, consisting of 72 women and 28 men, received their certificates from Mr Muhammad Bihayite, the Iranian ambassador to Ethiopia.

In the first half of 1992 a series of meetings were held between President Meles, Isayas (head of the then interim government of Eritrea) and Turabi, the powerful leader of Sudanese Muslim fundamentalists. It is believed that Turabi is responsible for the

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growing links between Meles and the Iranian government, who have requested some military training sites for Iran inside Ethiopia. The Ethiopian foreign minister, Seyoum Mesfin, made several visits to Iran between March and May 1992 to initiate military co-operation. The Prime Minister, Tamrat Layene, visited the Iranian president in December 1992.

The Sudanese government airforce has joined with the Ethiopian army in attacking the forces of the Christian rebel group Kefagne in the Gondar area of Ethiopia. Similarly, the Ethiopian government is assisting the Islamic Sudanese government in its attacks on the Sudanese People's Liberation Army rebels in southern Sudan, by allowing the Sudanese government forces to attack them from Ethiopian territory.

The spread of Islam

At least five hundred mosques have been built during the time of the present government. Funding for these comes from Libya and Saudi Arabia.

Hundreds of Islamic institutions and organizations have come into existence at local, regional and national level in the last two years. Most of these receive massive amounts of financial and material assistance from wealthy Arab countries. The government has agreed to establish an Islamic Training College in the southern region, which will be the first of its kind in the history of Ethiopia.

One of the newest of these organizations is the Ethiopian Muslims Democratic Movement, the first political party for Muslims of all ethnic groups in Ethiopia. It was established by the government and began officially functioning in April.

In 1993 for the first time the Muslim feast Eid-ul-Fitr was celebrated in a huge stadium in Addis Ababa (which holds about 50,000 people). The ceremonies were televised, and Mr Said Muhammad, secretary-general of the

Ethiopian Muslim Supreme, made a speech containing threats against any who opposed Muslims (i.e. Christians) which was enthusiastically cheered by the crowd. He also thanked the government for all they had done to support Muslims.

Mr Alshaye Babakar of the World Muslim League arranged weddings for ten couples on 18 March 1993. The total cost was 100,000 birr (US\$20,000), which was paid for by the World Muslim League in Addis Ababa. This sum included a gift of 5,000 birr to each couple to start them off in married life.

Christians are offered financial incentives to convert to Islam. The sums involved can be as great as 10,000 birr (US\$2,000).

It has been reported that President Ghadaffi of Libya is financing plans to turn Ethiopia into an exclusively Islamic country by the turn of the century.

Violence

In the last two years there have been many attacks by Islamic groups, in particular the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia (IFLO), on Christians and churches in eastern and south-eastern Ethiopia.

The spread of Islamic fundamentalism

Ethiopia, divided and weak, is an ideal breeding ground for fundamentalist political forces seeking to bring about serious destabilization and upset the balance of the region. The various different nationalist groupings who are competing to establish their political and economic bases in different regions of Ethiopia are also seeking to develop relations with radical Arab/fundamentalist movements as a means of consolidating their positions. The doubling up of nationalism/regionalism with Islamic fundamentalism in Ethiopia would create a fertile ground for the spread of fundamentalism.

The government's policies on the internal

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balance of ethnicity and religion in Ethiopia constitute a serious threat to external relations; this could lead to the distancing, if not the complete separation, of Ethiopia from Black Africa, the moderate Arab/Islamic countries in North Africa and the Middle East, and Israel.

Islamic fundamentalism is already gaining ground in the east and south-east of the area claimed by Oromo extremists. The Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia (IFLO) is an active Islamic fundamentalist force operating in the area and musters a growing military force. The IFLO has potential allies that include several militant Ethiopian Somali groups, and others in Somalia and Djibouti. In the longer term the IFLO is likely to gain control of large areas in eastern and south-eastern Ethiopia and establish a radical fundamentalist base with or without other groups from within the region. As an autonomous or independent region, it would probably be well supplied by sympathetic governments in the region, who want nothing in return but the IFLO's support for their efforts to spread pan-Islamic fundamentalist thinking.

Shari'ah law

Despite the overall Christian majority in Ethiopia, it is considered likely that areas which are predominantly Muslim, such as the Afar and Somali regions, may vote to adopt elements of Islamic Shari'ah law.

HARASSMENT OF CHRISTIANS IN REGION 4

Arsi Zone in Region 4 has a majority of Oromos, who in this part of Ethiopia are almost all Muslim. There is a large minority (some estimates say 45%) of Amharas, who in this area are almost all Christians. Several hundred Amharas were killed and many churches and houses burnt in Arsi between November 1991 and June 1992 by Muslim members of the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), under their regional

leader, Dima Gurmessa.

In December 1992 a conflict between Amharas and Oromos in Arsi Negele was resolved in the traditional way by a meeting of the elders from both sides who made peace and ordered that in any future disturbance those responsible would have to pay a fine of 50,000 birr (US\$10,000) to the government and 100,000 birr (US\$20,000) to the victims.

Since the beginning of this year, threats and violence towards Amharas have been building up again, despite the December agreement. Neither the central government nor the regional administration appear to have made any effort to safeguard the lives and property of the Amharas in this area. As is typical in the complex ethnic and religious context of Ethiopia, attacks directed against an ethnic group, the Amharas, by another ethnic group, the Oromos, are in fact *a religious* conflict. A Muslim Amhara living in the region would be quite safe from attack.

Listed below are a number of incidents which occurred in Region 4 in which Amharas have suffered attack from Oromos.

January 1993 - A campaign was launched in all six districts of Arba Guggu province, and particularly in Cholle district, aimed at disarming Amharas. Slogans were chanted, proclaiming that members of the All Amhara People's Organization (AAPO) could not be armed and must hand in their firearms. Another slogan threatened with the statement that they had yet to be attacked. Forty-one Amharas were arrested and imprisoned without any legal proceedings by members of the OPDO, the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM) and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF, the party which forms the central government).

January 1993 - A teacher named Tasfaye Shoarget was ambushed on his way back from school in Arsi Negele, and attacked with a machete. Passers by intervened and took him

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to hospital.

10 February 1993 - A demonstration was held, led by the secretary of the Council of Cholle District of Arba Guggu Province. The demonstrators chanted slogans against the AAPO such as "Amharas are our enemies; AAPO can neither open a branch office nor operate in our region, otherwise we shall attack them." A machine-gun was aimed at the AAPO's office and the Ethiopian flag lowered from the mast. After the demonstration an AAPO supporter, Mr Yalew Ayker, raised the Ethiopian flag again. For this action he was imprisoned by members of the EPRDF (acting without a court order).

16 February 1993 - Mr Taye Mekonnen, a local spokesman for the AAPO, who had committed no crime, was arrested and imprisoned without charge.

20 February 1993 - Amharas of the Amucha Yeselam Berr Peasant Association in Guna, Arba Guggu district, were attacked by bandits on their way to Moyu market place and robbed of all their goods. This action was supervised by the Chairman of the District Council and the local representative of the central government who were accompanied by militiamen armed with two machine-guns. The officials proclaimed, "No Amharic-speakers shall make business transactions here." On this occasion, EPRDF members intervened and there was no bloodshed.

March 1993 - Seventeen Amharas living in Werenso Guro neighbourhood of Arba Guggu district were detained by OPDO militiamen and imprisoned without charge. One of these seventeen, Mr Ashagre Negash, was executed by the OPDO militiamen. The remaining sixteen were ordered to pay 1,000 birr if they wanted bail. This sum is impossibly large for poor farmers to find, and they are still in prison.

26 March 1993 - A group of Amharas travelling from Asseko to Abbomsa were robbed at a crossing on the Nerba river. The

names of two of the victims were Nigussie Tessema and Gizaw Kidane.

April 1993 - Mr Gets Tegegne, a farmer in Arsi Negele, was killed by a spear and dismembered with a machete, his internal organs being removed for witchcraft purposes.

April 1993 - Two boys, Zeleke Hails Gebre-Selassie and Mulugeta Abebaw Ferede, both aged fourteen, were killed by spears in Ashele. Officials of the area buried them before any investigation could be carried out. A relative of the boys, Hailu Bekele, who is a priest, has been imprisoned on the orders of the area officials since April 1993.

4 April 1993 - A ceremony was held in Arba Guggu district to hoist the Oromo regional emblem on the flagpoles in and around Abbomsa. Oromos were armed with guns, swords and hunting knives. Some held the knives to their own necks to simulate slaying and chanted, "This is how we will treat the Amharas; this region belongs to Oromos only; Amharas must leave; no neftegna (settlers) organization shall operate in our region." Three houses belonging to Amharas were hit with bullets during the "festivities".

8 April 1993 - Oromos from all over Asseko district gathered and chanted anti-Amhara slogans, including, "Neftegna, hurry up, leave our region." Insults were rained on Amharas, and there was gunfire. The rally converged on the Asseko Elementary and Junior High School compound, where they removed and threw away the Ethiopian flag, replacing it with the Oromo regional emblem. Teachers and pupils afterwards took turns to remove the Oromo regional emblem before vacating the school. For this, more than ten teachers were imprisoned. Public pressure caused their release, but at least eight were imprisoned again.

17-19 April 1993 - A meeting was held at Abbomsa Comprehensive Secondary School, chaired by Dima Gurmessa, the OPDO Zonal Administrator. The meeting passed the

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following resolutions, dictated by Dima Gurmesssa:

(a) Amharas living at Asseko neighbourhood have not accepted our regional authority and therefore must be annihilated in their home neighbourhood of Asseko.

(b) The method of attack shall consist of two phases. First, Amharas will be ordered to lay down their arms, which they will disobey. Thereupon, field commanders will commence looting and burning of houses. In the second phase militiamen and the Oromo peasantry shall select Amharas and shoot them.

General situation of Amharas

Amhara peasant-farmers have had their land confiscated and given to Oromos. Many of the farmers have therefore been displaced from the countryside in areas such as Laypiso, Balku, Nayu and Adabu, and have moved to Arsi Negele town. There they are sleeping in the open on the verandas of public buildings, and do not have adequate food, clothing or medical care.

If an Oromo claims that the livestock or draught animals being driven into town by an Amhara belong to him then the Amhara has to forfeit his property and hand it over to the Oromo. Any Amhara who protests in such a situation is liable to be beaten up and imprisoned. Release is usually conditional on payment of 50-60 birr.

The central government's Charter and the Directives of Region 4 stipulate that Oromigna is the official language of the region, and that anyone who speaks Oromigna is eligible for election. However, in Arba Guggu district an individual with a non-Oromo name is not permitted to stand for election even if he speaks fluent Oromigna.

At school Amhara children are now taught in Oromigna, which uses the Latin alphabet, rather than in their own language and its alphabet.

Relief aid sent by the central government to the region after the violence of summer 1992 was handed out only to Oromos, although the victims of the violence were Amharas. It was declared that "neftegnas cannot be beneficiaries" of the relief aid. Over 1,500 Amharas were therefore forced by hunger to leave Asseko district.

Please write to your Ethiopian ambassador on behalf of the Amhara Christians of Arsi Zone. Politely emphasize the following points: (a) The injustices suffered by Amharas at the hands of Oromos. These include the arbitrary confiscation of land and animals i.e. their means of livelihood, and the fact that relief aid intended for them was given to people who had no need of it. (b) Dima Gurmesssa's plan to annihilate the Amharas of Asseko. Mr Gurmesssa demonstrated last year that he is quite capable of carrying out the burning and shooting which he advocated at the meeting in April 1993 described above. Ask the Ambassador to prevail on his government to enforce law, order, justice and security for all the people of Arsi Zone.

The address of the Ethiopian Ambassador to Britain is Dr Solomon Gidada, Embassy of Ethiopia, 17 Princes Gate, London SW7 1PZ

EGYPT

A CASE HISTORY OF HARASSMENT
(names omitted for the safety of those involved)

M. is an Egyptian Christian, born in 1969, and now studying at university. In July 1992, M. was summoned to the office of the State Security Investigation (SSI) in the part of Cairo where she lives, through the local Anglican church of that area, where she was an active member. M. was questioned on the fourth floor by officer T.A., who was dressed in plainclothes. "He was kind to me," she said. "He brought me lemonade. He asked how I was doing and asked about my life."

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The officer wanted to know if M. knew someone named H. She said no.

"Then he asked about another name, and I said that I knew this person. He said that this was the same person as H. The officer asked me if I knew that this person had converted [to Christianity] and I said no. He asked me if I knew any converts and I said no. He asked about Y. I told him that I knew many people of that name - and that it was also my brother's name. The officer got angry. He told me: 'You know that Y. I'm talking about.'" (Y. is a convert to Christianity.)

The officer then told M. that she was a "bad girl" to be associating with converts to Christianity. He threatened her with sexual abuse if she "continued to walk with them". He reminded her of the accidents in the university area (M. said that twice in May 1992 she was hit by cars - once a police car and once a normal car; both times she fell to the ground but escaped injury) and then warned her with the following words: "We could easily get rid of you."

Two days after the meeting at the SSI office, M. was walking in the street and a tall man, in his forties, caught her hand and told her: "If you don't stay away from these guys, we'll kill you." M. understood him to mean friends of hers who had converted to Christianity. In September 1992 she was summoned twice to the SSI office but did not go.

At the university, M. was involved in a group that "talked to people about Christianity". One of the students M. had discussions with was A. the daughter of a sheikh. A. had converted but had not yet been baptized. Then A. stopped coming to the university. (A. reportedly had raised her parents' suspicion. They found a Bible and had noticed a change in her behaviour; A. apparently named M. as the person responsible for her conversion.)

"About 45 days ago, " M. reported, "a man entered our house and threatened me. It was about ten in the morning and no one else was

home. The man said that he had papers about fees for the building. I wanted to telephone my father, but the man entered and closed the door. He grabbed me and said: 'What do you think you're doing with A.?' At that point, a neighbour knocked at the door and the man left. Two weeks later, the same man grabbed M. on a street near her house. He told her that he would kill her if she did not sever ties with A.

On 22 February 1993 M. was walking on the street with friends, in front of her university faculty. They started to cross the street when a black and white taxi pulled out of its lane of traffic and started moving very fast towards M. She was hit, fell down, and the taxi sped away.

On 23 February 1993 M. received a telephone call at about 1.00 p.m. from a friend who is active in another church. He told her that he had been taken from his house on the morning of 21 February and brought to the SSI office. He told M. that SSI would not release him unless she appeared. M. went to the SSI office at 2.00 p.m. that day.

She was seen by T.A., the same officer who had questioned her in July. He asked why she had not responded to SSI's requests to see her. He said that he wanted to know about her activities at the university. When M. did not provide the officer with any information, he gave her a paper to sign. He cursed her when she started to read it. "I told him that I had to read it before signing it. There were paragraphs of writing and then blank spaces. I crossed out the blank spaces. He held me strongly at the back of my neck. I tore up the paper after I told him I would not sign anything with empty spaces," M. said.

The officer then made M. wait for about twenty minutes. He then asked about A., the daughter of the sheikh. When M. told him that she knew many people called A., the officer provided her full name. M. admitted that she knew A. but that she no longer came to school. The officer said that SSI had received a

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complaint from A., charging that M. had "played with her mind". According to M. the officer's mood changed and he became angry.

"He acted as if he was about to hit me. He banged his fist on the desk. He told me that I was courageous and that I should tell him everything that happened at the university. I told him that I do not see or hear anything. 'No, you will go and hear and tell us,' he told

me. I said that I could not promise. He wanted to know if my friends talk to Muslims. He told me that if I didn't do this, they would bring me back and rape me in front of everyone."

M. said that after this encounter with SSI, she decided that it was best to discontinue her activities with her church and only attend Sunday school.

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