

Christian workers on trial

WEA Religious Liberty Commission (21.03.2005) / HRWF Int. (23.03.2005) - Email info@hrwf.net - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - According to its constitution, Senegal is a secular state. However, many Senegalese regard their nation as Islamic, with no place for visible, active Christianity, especially missionary work.

This intolerance is fostered and fed at the highest levels of local Islamic leadership. Increased anti-Christian sentiment is expressing itself in increasing levels of intolerance and more frequent incidents of persecution in what has historically been one of West Africa's most tolerant Muslim nations.

Dakar to host dialogue

Senegal's President Maitre Abdoulaye Wade has announced that Senegal will host the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) summit and a subsequent Muslim-Christian dialogue in December 2006. In a 24 February interview in Yemen with the Yemen Observer, President Wade said that a dialogue of leaders from the region was needed to discuss the issue of religious tolerance.

President Wade told the Yemen Observer, "I have proposed an Islamic and Christian dialogue that would be at the end of the conference we are organizing in Senegal, immediately after the OIC summit in November '06, if this date is maintained."

According to the Yemen Observer, "Saudi Arabia has put forward a rival proposal to host the next OIC summit in Mecca, but Wade claims strong support for Dakar, including African and Western countries interested in bridging the misunderstandings between Muslims and Christians. 'The idea is in the air,' he said, 'for a dialogue between Muslims, Christians and Jews. This dialogue exists – the Pope has supported seminars between ulmmas and archbishops of the Vatican, but there has never been a summit of the leaders of the world. The leaders of the world need to send a very strong message to the world community for tolerance and understanding,' said Wade.

"In Senegal, he pointed out, the population is 5% Christian. 'In every family we can have Muslims and Christians. Everyone should have the right to practice their own religion, and the Prophet is an example of this – he received Jews, he received Christians. But now there is intolerance and prejudice. We have to eliminate this and learn to live in the same land, the same country, the same Earth, because I think we all have the same God.' " (Link 1)

The key word in all this is clearly "misunderstandings". A regional dialogue to clear up "the misunderstandings between Muslims and Christians" might not advance the cause of religious tolerance very much, as the persecuted apostates and remnant Christians of the Muslim world might struggle to accept that their experience of Islam as an oppressive, intolerant system is a "misunderstanding". (This in no way implies that all Muslims are intolerant.) However, a dialogue about full religious freedom (as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights article 18 – which includes the right to convert), security for all, equality for all (including before the law), and the problem of the inherent intolerance of Qur'anic and historic Islam would be very interesting and possibly very worthwhile.

Senegal presently has an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to religious tolerance. The Reverend Moises Suriba, a Brazilian Christian worker, and his colleague, Francois Iraguha from Rwanda, minister to street boys and homeless young men in Dakar, Senegal. They have become victims of Senegal's rising religious intolerance. Senegal's historic commitment to religious tolerance is about to be tested in the courts in what is the first legal action against Christian workers in Senegal.

Mission under attack

The Reverend Suriba and his co-worker Francois Iraguha run a ministry for street boys and homeless young men in Dakar. Some 18 young men live in the Bethany Mission house and receive professional skills training. Dozens of other street boys and homeless young men go in and out of the house freely: for showers, medical care, food, clothing and company.

According to reports, neighbours became hostile towards the Christian ministry, especially after several young Muslim men turned to follow Christ. On several occasions groups of local Muslims have invaded the house and been disruptive and abusive. The Christian workers are regularly threatened.

Eventually one hostile neighbour pressed charges against Suriba and Iraguha, alleging that they had physically assaulted them. Suriba and Iraguha were not able to defend themselves in court against the charges as the case was heard in their absence.

On 28 December 2004, Suriba and Iraguha were convicted of assault and sentenced to one month jail plus a fine of 50,000 FCFA (US\$100 – around an average week's wage in Senegal). Suriba and Iraguha have appealed against the judgment. The penalties have been deferred and the case will soon be heard again by the Court of Appeal in Dakar. Meanwhile, the same hostile neighbour who lodged the initial charges of assault has since lodged a complaint against the deferment of the penalties.

An observer notes that this is the first time a hostile Muslim has attempted to use the law as a weapon against a Christian ministry in Senegal, and they fear that if he is successful this could set a new trend in persecution in Senegal. This case will set a precedent one way or the other.

It would be good for the international Christian community to watch this case. Will Senegal refuse to tolerate intolerance, even in the face of rising Islamic zeal and anti-Christian, anti-missionary sentiment? If Senegal wants to dialogue about religious tolerance with regional leaders in Dakar's grand halls in December 2006 then it must promote and demonstrate religious tolerance in Senegal's mosques and on the streets of Dakar today. For the sake of Dakar's homeless young men, indeed for the sake of all Senegalese society which is the ultimate beneficiary of such Christian ministries, we hope and pray that tolerance and justice prevail.

Links

Senegalese president calls for dialogue of world leaders

By Faris Al-Sanabani & Gabriel Matthew

Yemen Observer Newspaper

24 Feb 2005 – Vol.VIII Issue 08

<http://www.yobserver.com/cgi-bin/yobserver/exec/view.cgi/17/3968>

SEE ALSO

Senegal to Host Interfaith Dialogue Meet

By Javid Hassan, Arab News, RIYADH, 23 February 2005

<http://www.arabnews.com/?page=1§ion=0&article=59410&d=23&m=2&y=2005>

[Back to the Table of Contents](#)
