

PROTESTANT CHURCH OF ALGERIA

August 11th, 2022

UN Speech – 31/08/2022

Good morning / afternoon ambassadors present here, UN representatives, development partners, civil society organisations, media, ladies, and gentlemen.

Introduction of yourself

The association was founded and given a licence by the Algerian government back in 1974.

When I was 21, I learnt about the Christian faith whilst abroad and decided to leave my former Muslim belief to become a Christian over then 42 years ago

History of Christianity in Algeria and the Christian revival

The church in Algeria existed since the early centuries, produced many Godly men and women such as St Augustine. thousands of Algerian Muslims have been choosing to become Christians since the 1980s. It came to be understood as a revival taking place in the Northern Algeria Kabyle region where Christianity is spreading very rapidly amongst the indigenous Amazigh people.

Searching to learn and know more about the Christian faith through social media networks, TV channels or word of mouth, the number is still growing till today.

Algerian demographic and current human rights situation

While 99 percent of the Algerian population of 43 million are Sunni Muslims, the remaining percent is comprised of Christians, Jews and Muslim minorities including Ahmadiyya and Shi'a Muslims.

The constitution sets of religious protections at Article 51: "Freedom of conscience and freedom of opinion shall be inviolable. Freedom of worship shall be guaranteed and exercised without discrimination in compliance with the law. The State shall impartially guarantee the protection of places of worship." And Algeria is a signatory of the International Covenant on Civil Political Rights.

However, the religious plurality and human rights situation especially with regards to freedoms to exercise and live out a non-Muslim faith in Algerian society is far from this in reality.

I will proceed to raise four key areas in the remainder of this talk

1. Church closures
2. Failure to grant Christian associations or Churches their licenses – in direct contradiction to the freedoms warranted by Ordinance 06-03 (of 2006) as per the Algerian Constitution.
3. Restriction to import of Christian literature
4. And finally, the harassment faced by Christians and Christian leaders by the Authorities.

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Church closures and sealings

Firstly, the Algerian authorities are engaging in an active and extensive plan to get rid of churches and restrict the religious, socio-economic freedoms and even civil liberties of Algerian Christians.

Since January 2018, 25 Churches have been closed, the majority being EPA affiliated churches.

In recent months, the authority's campaign against churches and Algerian Christians has even been reported to have escalated.

To give you an idea, the Governor of Tizi Ouzou, a northern city in Algerian began legal proceedings for the closure of four more churches in that province and by March 2022, restrictions were placed on two more churches insinuating that this systematic campaign against Christians in Algeria has every evidence to be continuing in full force.

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Failure to grant Christian associations or Churches their licenses

The justification to forcibly close churches lies in the argument that these "buildings are not fit for such activities." In many cases, Christians have been beaten and treated violently just so that they can seal these premises.

But when the Evangelical Protestant Alliance, an umbrella association that represents the majority of Churches across Algeria is rejected from renewing their license in 2014, (having been granted such rights since 1974) the case becomes much more severe.

The standard democratic tools we should be able to exercise are inhibited, through back-handed laws of empty promise coupled with authorities ensuing a mission of violence, interrogation, and harassment.

It is no wonder that Algeria was designated a Special Watch List Country in 2021 by the US Secretary of State largely due to their engagement in or tolerance of severe religious freedom violations. And Open Doors organisation even labelled Christian persecution in Algeria this as a 'systematic campaign' against Christians in 2019.

Therefore, the failure to grant Christian associations or Church licenses becomes more rightly seen as a government ploy to restrict religious freedoms actively and systematically in spite of legislature that states otherwise.

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Restriction to import Christian literature

Thirdly, the restriction to import Christian literature has been another severe facet of the Algerian authority's campaign against Christians.

On the 27th of February 2020, Rachid Mohamed Seighir, pastor of Oran City church and owner of a bookshop in Oran were sentenced to 2 years in prison and fined. Their conviction was under article 11.2 of Ordinance 06-03, which criminalises the "printing, storing, or distributing materials that can "shake" the faith of a Muslim."

Similar charges and punishments have been reported against several others in the country and imprisonments or criminal punishments in this nature should be condemned by the UN. They are arbitrary, unjustified, and systematic.

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Harassment faced by Christians and Christian leaders by the authorities

Fourthly, harassment faced by Christian individuals and leaders has been increasing and we have seen many cases, but I will bring forward the case of Hamid Soudad before I bring this talk to a close.

Hamid Soudad was arrested on 20 January 2020. That same day he was interrogated and sentenced under a blasphemy law to the maximum prison sentence of five years. His crime – reposted a cartoon of the prophet Mohammad to his personal Facebook account.

The UN Special Rapporteurs including the Special Rapporteur on FoRB outlined their concerns to the Algerian authorities in the case of Mr Soudad. To which the Government of Algeria replied defensively, reaffirming that they will not back down.

Meanwhile, countless times I am interrogated at the airports and police stations, I was sentenced for three years in prison, and acquitted after appealing against the sentence, and my fellow Church pastors are met with extensive police investigations that creates a wholly hostile environment for Christians to exist let alone live a dignified life in Algeria.

But the solution is not to run away.

Requests to the UPR

These past four years and a half in which the authorities have systematically campaigned against Christian churches and individuals must stop.

When Freedom of Religion of Belief goes, so does many other foundational human rights too. Our human rights are under attack. It's being denied, and arguably the whole Algerian society suffers.

We call on the UN to:

1. Renew the license for the EPA.
2. To ensure that all 29 churches which were closed by the Algerian authorities since 2019 are reopened.
3. Grant permission for the Algerian Bible Society to import Bibles and Christian literature.
4. Condemn the discrimination and harassment faced by Algerian Christians especially Christian leaders in the country like myself.