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USCIRF condemns apostasy prosecution of Sudanese woman

Thomas Reese | May. 16, 2014 NCR Today

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom ([1]USCIRF [1]) [1] has strongly condemned the death sentence against Meriam Yahia Ibrahim Ishag, a Sudanese Christian woman accused of apostasy. Ibrahim was sentenced to death by hanging on May 15 after she refused to recant her faith. She also was sentenced to 100 lashes for adultery because although she was raised a Christian, the court considers her a Muslim and therefore not married to her Christian husband.

Full disclosure. I am a member of the commission.

Currently eight months pregnant, according to the USCIRF, "Ibrahim was arrested on February 17 after someone reported to the police her marriage to a Christian. Charged and sentenced for apostasy and adultery under articles 126 and 146 of the 1991 Criminal Code, she is being held in the Omdurman Federal Women?s Prison with her 20-month-old son. She is accused of leaving Islam to marry a Christian man, despite producing a marriage certificate which identified her as a Christian."

There is still hope for her. The court has postponed carrying out the sentence until two years after Ibrahim?s child is born. Her lawyers plan to appeal the conviction.

The United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands expressed their concern over the apostasy ruling and stressed everyone has a right to change their faith. The large diplomatic presence at her hearing was applauded by USCIRF. ?International attention to this case is critical to holding the Sudanese government accountable for its constitutional provisions and international commitments to protect and respect freedom of religion or belief not only for Mrs. Ibrahim, but all Sudanese, regardless of faith,? said Dr. Robert George, chair of USCIRF.

Amnesty International has also called for her release [2].

"While Ibrahim was born to a Muslim father and an Ethiopian Orthodox mother, her father left the family when she was six and she was raised a Christian," according to a press release from USCIRF [3]. "Ibrahim produced witnesses to attest to her lifelong faithfulness to Christianity, but the court prohibited the witnesses from testifying."

Since 1999 the State Department has designated, Sudan as a ?country of particular concern? (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act, based on the government?s systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief. According to USCIRF, "The government of President Omar al-Bashir imposes a restrictive interpretation of Shari?ah law on Muslims and non-Muslims alike, uses amputations and floggings for crimes and acts of 'indecency' and 'immorality,' and arrests, harasses, and discriminates against members of the small Christian community."

President al-Bashir and his National Congress Party (NCP) have stated that Sudan?s new constitution will be based on their interpretation of Shari?ah. Since South Sudan?s independence from Sudan in 2011, according to

USCIRF, "the number and severity of harsh Shari?ah-based judicial decisions has increased, including sentences of amputation for theft and sentences for stoning for adultery."

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[6], is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up [7].

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[1] http://www.uscirf.gov/
[2] http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/sudan-woman-facing-death-sentence-grounds-her-religion-must-be-released-2014-05-14
[3] http://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/press-releases/uscirf-strongly-condemns-apostasy-prosecution-sudanese-woman
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