



20 August 2020

Algeria: Protestant Churches Forcibly Closed

Joint written statement submitted by World Evangelical Alliance, the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches, the Protestant Church of Algeria and the Middle East Concern, to the Human Rights Council's 45th session (14 September – 6 October 2020) under Agenda item 4: Human rights situations that require the Council's attention.

The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) is a network of churches in over 130 nations that have each formed an evangelical alliance and over 100 international organizations joining together to give a world-wide identity, voice, and platform to more than 600 million evangelical Christians worldwide.

The Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches advises on public policy and advocacy, on programmatic directions, including analysis of systemic issues that underlie injustice and social transformation, and addresses particular programmatic and policy issues.

The Protestant Church of Algeria, (Église Protestante d'Algérie - EPA), is an Algerian Christian denomination founded in 1972 and officially recognized in 2011. The EPA is a member of the World Evangelical Alliance and of the World Council of Churches.

Middle East Concern (MEC) was founded in 1991, in response to needs expressed by Christian leaders in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA). MEC supports people in the MENA region who are marginalized, discriminated against or persecuted for being or becoming Christians.

For additional information, please contact: Michael Mutzner, WEA Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva at geneva@worldea.org or +41.22.890.1030

Church Street Station
P.O. Box 3402
New York, NY 10008-3402
United States

C/O RES, CP 23
Av. Sainte Clotilde 5
1211 Geneva 8
Switzerland

W. worldea.org
F. [fb.com/worldea](https://www.facebook.com/worldea)
T. [@WEA_UN](https://twitter.com/WEA_UN)
Y. [youtube.com/worldevangelicals](https://www.youtube.com/worldevangelicals)

Government forcibly closed Protestant churches

1. In November 2017, Algerian authorities began a campaign of intimidation against the Protestant-Evangelical Christian minority. In this campaign, most of the churches affiliated with the *Église Protestante d'Algérie* (EPA; Protestant Church of Algeria) were visited by committees formed of officials from the municipalities, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Fire Brigade, the national Gendarmerie and the Intelligence Department. The declared aim of these committees is “to check compliance with safety regulations.” Consequent church closure orders cited “lack of religious association permits,” or “lack of compliance with safety regulations” to operate as places of worship, or government Ordinance 06-03 (2006) which stipulates that permission must be obtained before using a building for non-Muslim worship.
2. Today, thirteen EPA affiliated churches and several non-EPA Protestant churches remain forcibly closed. The most recent church closures took place on 15 October 2019 when authorities sealed the doors of the largest Protestant church in Algeria, the Tizi Ouzou Full Gospel church, as well as the doors of the Spring of Life church in Makouda, the second largest Protestant church in Algeria with about 700 members and pastored by the EPA secretary.

Churches appealed to administrative courts against closure orders

3. In the Kabylie area in the province of Tizi Ouzou, the churches of Makouda, Tafat and Boghni (sealed by authorities on 24 September 2019) remain closed following an administrative court decision that rejected their request to cancel the governor’s order to close these churches.
4. Four closed churches in the province of Tizi Ouzou and five in Bejaia, have filed similar cases with the administrative courts. All nine churches are members of the EPA. Now with three negative verdicts by the administrative courts, the EPA anticipates more rejections from the courts.

Applications for using buildings for non-Muslim worship unanswered or rejected

5. The Algerian administrative courts recognized the governor’s authority to close the buildings under Ordinance 06-03. Since the Ordinance 06-03 was enacted in 2006, the authorities have failed to respond to any application for permission. Therefore, it has become standard practice for churches to rent premises and inform local authorities that they are being used as places of Christian worship. Some of these churches had been active for more than a decade.
6. Some have been ordered to “settle their situation” by applying individually to regional authorities. The church of Makouda made such an application in June 2018. The application remains unanswered to-date. Instead, in June 2020, the pastor was convicted and fined by another court for unauthorized modifications to the (church) building.
7. In May 2018, a pastor in Oran applied for a religious association license for his closed church, in response to a request by authorities. The Governor of Oran responded negatively to this request, stating that he is unable “*to establish an association with religious character at present, and until the issuance of the special statute for religious associations,*” and arguing that government-issued special statute for religious associations is a prerequisite for implementation of the Association Law of 2012.

Umbrella organization EPA registration not renewed

8. Founded in 1974, the EPA is the umbrella organization for the Protestant and Evangelical churches in Algeria. In 2013, the EPA applied for re-registration in accordance with the newly passed Association Law of 2012. To date, however, no response has been received, and the authorities have failed even to acknowledge receipt of the EPA application. The EPA elected a new board in October 2018 and notified the Ministry of Interior of the election

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results. However, the Ministry of the Interior has not yet delivered a confirmation receipt, due within 60 days as stipulated by the law, leaving the EPA registration and governance in limbo.

Recommendations to the Government of Algeria

9. In this context, the World Evangelical Alliance, together with the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs of the World Council of Churches, our common member the EPA, and the Christian advocacy organization Middle East Concern, appeal to the Human Rights Council to address with Algeria the country's situation of freedom of religion or belief, and make the following recommendations to the Government of Algeria:
10. Grant permission to all forcibly closed churches to re-open and grant permission to EPA-affiliated churches to continue to use rented premises as places of worship;
11. Withdraw all warnings, closure orders and court cases against churches and pastors;
12. Process the EPA's re-registration application and give notice of the renewal of the board, to confirm the EPA as a representative association of Protestant churches in Algeria;
13. Suspend and revise the Ordinance 06-03 (February 2006) setting out the conditions and rules for the exercise of non-Muslim religions, to ensure compliance with Algeria's obligations under international law, namely with the right to freedom of religion or belief.