Reintroduced law again jeopardizing status of some churches in Hungary
Adventist Church’s reapplication for official recognition is pending; No gap expected, religious liberty advocates say

Baird honored with lifetime achievement award for anti-tobacco work
South African helped ban smoking on airlines in 1980s

Human rights champion Amor was ‘friend to Adventists’
Former UN special rapporteur spoke out against intolerance, repression

Reintroduced law again jeopardizing status of some churches in Hungary
The saga of securing official church status in Hungary continues, despite what religious liberty advocates called encouraging news late last year when the Constitutional Court struck down the country’s controversial Law of Churches.

Prior to that ruling, more than 300 minority faiths -- among them the Seventh-day Adventist Church -- were set to lose official legal status in Hungary on January 1, after which they would undergo a reapplication process.

With the New Year, those churches are facing a similar situation.

The country’s Constitutional Court overturned the Law of Churches purely on technical grounds, and on December 30 Hungary’s majority conservative party “easily” reintroduced and passed essentially the same law, effective January 1, said Dwayne Leslie, the Adventist world church’s legislative representative in Washington, D.C.

Hungary’s Parliament claims the law is necessary to weed out businesses or individuals posing as churches just to gain the accompanying rights and privileges. Furthermore, the majority government maintains that the law doesn’t infringe on religious liberty. It doesn’t “forbid” worship according to any faith tradition, Hungary’s minister of state for government communication, Zoltan Kovacs, wrote in a recent Wall Street Journal opinion piece.

Kovacs said the law merely outlines how churches can gain official recognition “if they show themselves to be popular enough.” One condition requires a church to prove a decades-long history in the country and count more than 1,000 members.

The Hungarian government is “making efforts to explain to the international community that this is not a human rights issue,” said Ganoune Diop, the Adventist world church’s representative to the United Nations.

“The situation in Hungary is very complex, and there are several issues at play, from economic to judicial and legislative -- and in front of these issues, religion. The government sees the de-registration of churches as a response, in part, to the tremendous challenges the country is facing,” Diop said.

Some experts have even predicted a further recession on Hungary’s horizon, he added.

“We must voice our concerns over the de-registration of churches, but whatever we say about the situation in Hungary must be prudent and sensitive to the context and sovereignty of Hungary,” Diop said.
Many members of the international religious liberty community maintain that regardless of the country’s internal struggles, the law poses undue challenges for legitimate religious organizations.

“Now we not only have an objective standard of what constitutes a church, but we also need a two-thirds vote of Parliament just to become an official religion, and we think that’s problematic,” Leslie said.

Currently, 82 of the some 300 minority religions de-registered under the latest law have reapplied for official status, among them the Seventh-day Adventist Church, denomination officials in Hungary said.

Religious liberty analysts said provisions of the new law indicate that those churches that have already applied for status will not experience a gap in official recognition. They’ll maintain previous recognition while a decision regarding their ultimate status is pending in Parliament.

Members of Parliament have indicated that they’ll arrive at a decision by the end of February, analysts said. Church leaders in Hungary report that “communication with the government” suggests that the Seventh-day Adventist Church will regain official church status.

“One positive improvement in the new law is that it does not prohibit denominations to use the term ‘church,’ even if they are not accepted by Parliament,” said Ócsai Tamás, president of the church’s Hungarian Union Conference. Churches to which Parliament does not grant official recognition will receive a “religious association” status, he said.

“Hopefully some churches in Hungary -- including the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which has been operating in the country for more than a century -- will have a positive answer [next month],” said John Graz, director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty for the Adventist world church.

“We encourage all believers to pray for religious freedom in Hungary, so our church and others can continue to operate for the good of the nation as in the past,” Graz said.

Top Seventh-day Adventist leadership in Hungary and the church’s Trans-European Division will continue to closely monitor the situation, along with the denomination’s global religious liberty community.

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Baird honored with lifetime achievement award for anti-tobacco work
Denis Baird, right, receives the General Conference Health Ministries Medal of Distinction from Associate Health Ministries Director Dr. Peter Landless in a ceremony on December 17 in Johannesburg. Baird’s wife Bridget holds the award.

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Johannesburg, South Africa
Ansel Oliver/ANN

Long since retired, Denis Baird, now 92, was working as a full-time Seventh-day Adventist minister and launched what is now South Africa’s National Council Against Smoking, an organization that helped the country in the 1980s become one of the first nations to ban smoking on airlines.

The Adventist world church last month awarded Baird the General Conference Health Ministries Medal of Distinction for his lifetime of service and promotion of healthful living.

“It’s richly merited. Denis was a pathfinder. Before him, no one was working on tobacco control in South Africa,” said Dr. Yussuf Saloojee, executive director of National Council Against Smoking.

Many health workers say South Africa’s tobacco industry was intertwined with the apartheid government and that going against it meant long shot odds. In 1967, Baird’s angle to challenge tobacco companies was a simple request: tell him the amount of nicotine and tar in their cigarettes.

When companies refused to offer information on ingredients, he contacted what is now the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. Officials there agreed to study the cigarettes and requested 200 samples of each cigarette brand. For the study’s integrity, they needed them delivered personally.

Baird took a flight to Atlanta, his luggage mostly filled with cartons of cigarettes. High above the Atlantic Ocean, he said he remembers having no doubts on the outcome of the study.

“I felt very strongly that it was going to work. We had strong indications that cigarettes in South Africa were very dangerous.” The rate of lung cancer among smokers in South Africa was much higher than in other countries, he said.

Months later the results concurred. Cigarettes in South Africa were found to contain more than double the rates of nicotine and tar than most cigarettes produced in other countries.

The results created an uproar when they were published in 1968 by Dr. Harry Seftel, a professor of medicine at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and a co-founder of the council with Baird.

Baird’s council work was in addition to his job as a full-time local church minister. His ministry career also included posts as a conference president in Rhodesia – now Zimbabwe – and the Cape Conference in South Africa.

Today, some 5.4 million people die annually due to tobacco related illnesses and this figure is projected to increase to more than 8 million a year by the year 2030, church health officials say.

Some countries have shown a steady decrease in smoking, such as the United States and Australia. But smoking is increasing in other parts of the world, including many developing countries, health experts say.

“Unless interventions are put in place and on a wide and broad scale, these statistics are unlikely to
“The battle will never be won unless current smokers are targeted and assisted to stop smoking,” Landless said. “It is crucial and important to focus on preventing the initiation of tobacco use, but it is equally important to assist people to stop smoking as well as to lobby for tobacco restrictions and control.”

In 2000, the American Cancer Society gave the South Africa Government’s Ministry of Health a Luther Terrey Award for its support of tobacco legislation. The society said smoking rates in 1998 had dropped 30 percent since 1991 because of government efforts, which serve as a model for other low-income countries in dealing with tobacco industries.

“[Baird] is a role model,” said Saloojee. “The foundations were laid by the work that he did.”

Human rights champion Amor was ‘friend to Adventists’

Jan. 10, 2012
Silver Spring, Maryland, United States
Bettina Krause/ANN

Religious liberty advocates are calling the death of Tunisian human rights lawyer Abdelfattah Amor a great loss for the international religious freedom community.

Amor, who served from 1993 to 2004 as the United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, died January 2 following a heart attack.

Amor, a Muslim, was widely acknowledged as one of the world’s foremost advocates of religious freedom for all people of faith. In 1995, he was one of the few UN representatives to visit Iran, and he subsequently issued a groundbreaking report on religious intolerance and repression in that country.

At the time of his death, Amor was a member of the UN Human Rights Committee and had recently been appointed as president of Tunisia’s National Commission for the Investigation of Corruption and Bribery.

Amor “proved himself to be a valued friend of the Adventist Church’s religious freedom work,” said John Graz, director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty for the Seventh-day Adventist world church.
Amor spoke at the denomination’s 4th and 5th world congresses on religious liberty in Rio and Manila, respectively. He visited world church headquarters in Maryland and spoke at Spencerville Adventist Church, also in Maryland.

“On a number of occasions he reported before the UN General Assembly in New York on [the] persecution of Adventists around the world, and his support proved very helpful to us,” said Graz, who last met with Amor last November in Geneva.

“[Amor] was a man of great knowledge, openness, courage and integrity. He had tremendous compassion for all those who suffered discrimination or oppression,” Graz said.

“My deepest sympathy goes to his wife and children,” he added. “They are in our prayers as they mourn their loss.”

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