

Suffered in Israeli jail, says Christian convert: Israeli nuclear whistleblower Mordechai Vanunu

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Released Israeli nuclear whistleblower Mordechai Vanunu said on April 21 he had been persecuted by the authorities in Israel because of his conversion to Christianity. "I want to tell those who say I am a traitor, I suffered here 18 years because I am a Christian," Vanunu said after his release from 18 years in jail. He had been convicted of treason for giving information about Israel's nuclear weapons program to Britain's *Sunday Times* newspaper in 1986.

Vanunu emerged from prison flashing victory signs and waving to a crowd of cheering supporters who waited to greet him. He said he was treated harshly, including being placed in solitary confinement for 12 of his 18 years in prison, because he abandoned Judaism to become a Christian. He complained of "cruel and barbaric treatment" during his incarceration.

"I was baptized into Christianity. If I was a Jewish [believer], I would not have had all this suffering, isolation, only because I am a Christian," said Vanunu, a former technician at Israel's top secret Dimona nuclear facility in the southern Negev desert. After his release, Vanunu immediately demanded that Israel open the nuclear site to international inspection.

Among those who welcomed Vanunu was Edmond Browning, retired U.S. presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, and the Anglican bishop in Jerusalem, Riah Abu El-Assal, who escorted Vanunu to St. George's (Anglican) Cathedral in Jerusalem. Browning and wife Patti, along with the Episcopal Peace Fellowship, had taken up Vanunu's cause over the years. Since his release, Vanunu has stayed at the cathedral's guest house, and his brother said on April 30 that they are seeking protection from the Anglican Church in light of reported death threats.

In 1986 Vanunu was lured from London to Rome, where he was kidnapped by Israeli agents and smuggled back to Israel to face a secret trial that led to his conviction for treason and a prison sentence. In a live broadcast, carried worldwide, Vanunu explained that he had disclosed secrets about his country's nuclear program because of his opposition to weapons of mass destruction. At the same time, he insisted that he had nothing else to tell. "There are no more secrets."

Bishop Abu El-Assal offered Vanunu sanctuary but said security there may not be enough to guarantee his safety. Vanunu declared he wants to move to the U.S., find a wife, and teach history. However, Israel has barred him from leaving the country for one year—and the restriction may be renewed. -*Ecumenical News International*