**Rwanda closes thousands of churches in bid for more control**

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Rwanda's government has closed thousands of churches and dozens of mosques as it seeks to assert more control over a vibrant religious community whose sometimes makeshift operations, authorities say, have threatened the lives of followers.

President Paul Kagame has said he was shocked by the high number of churches in this small East African country. "700 churches in Kigali?" he said of houses of worship in the nation's capital in March. "Are these boreholes (deep wells) that give people water? I don't think we have as many boreholes. Do we even have as many factories? This has been a mess!"

Kagame said Rwanda doesn't need so many houses of worship, claiming that such a high number is only fit for bigger, more developed economies that have the means to sustain them.

The closings are bringing mixed reactions in Rwanda, where human rights groups have long accused Kagame's government of clamping down on freedom of expression, which the president has denied. Six Pentecostal pastors who protested the church closures were arrested and accused of "illegal meetings with bad intentions," and since then other critics have refused to discuss the issue with The Associated Press.

While Rwanda's government describes the closures as tackling churches that have failed to comply with building safety standards, it is taking other steps to oversee the religious community in the largely Christian nation of 12 million people.

Proposed legislation aims to regulate faith-based organisations separately from civil society organizations, said Alexis Nkurunziza, president of the private Rwanda Religious Leaders Forum. Suggestions from religious leaders soon will be forwarded to the Rwanda Law Reform Commission for scrutiny and later to parliament, he said. The legislation is expected to be passed as the ruling party holds a majority of parliamentary seats.

The new legislation would require pastors to have a theology degree before they start their own churches so that they teach correct doctrine, said those familiar with the discussions. The aim is to regulate the Pentecostal churches that often spring up under leaders who claim to have received a call to preach. Not everyone, however, has the money for such a degree, some observers have said.

The majority of churches that have been closed are said to be small Pentecostal prayer houses, with some preachers suspected of growing rich off often impoverished followers. Some churches meet in tents or houses that cannot accommodate crowds and noise pollution from nighttime gatherings is a concern, authorities said.

"The prayer houses were found in such poor physical conditions, and we are not targeting any religion," Anastase Shyaka, the head of the Rwanda Governance Board that regulates faith-based organizations, told the AP. "We are closing prayer houses of all different denominations and asking them to meet existing health and safety standards for their followers."

Local media in the capital have reported that over 6 000 churches have been closed so far across the country, but Shaka said the actual number was still being compiled.

Rwanda's government respects freedom of worship but protecting lives of people comes first, he said, adding that churches which meet the required safety standards will be reopened.

One new requirement for churches is the installation of a lightning rod, after a lightning strike in March killed 16 worshippers and injured 140 at a Seventh-Day Adventist church in the country's south.

Mosques across Rwanda also have been affected. About 100 have been closed, the leader of the country's Muslim community, Mufti Sheikh Salim Hitimana, told AP.

"We are now trying to fix what the government told us to do," he said.

Some evangelical leaders said they support Rwanda's crackdown, saying that protecting the lives of churchgoers is important and having qualified, trained leaders is necessary.

"Government efforts to have churches build better structures are welcome to all of us," said Esron Maniragaba, president of the Evangelical Free Church of Rwanda and a leader with the Evangelical Alliance of Rwanda.

Some Rwandans said the government should supervise churches and take action against exploitative pastors.

"Some pastors are motivated by greed and start churches to defraud their followers," said Charles Murinzi, who attends an Anglican church in the capital.