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CSW welcomes European Parliament resolution

CSW (12.07.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2ulSXtc> - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) welcomes the 6 July resolution passed by the European Parliament (EP), which comprehensively addresses the human rights crisis in Eritrea and recommends steps that can be taken by individual nations and regional or international bodies to assist in improving it.

The significant EP resolution “condemns in the strongest terms the “systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations” underway in Eritrea. Amongst other things, it notes the rise in “harassment of and violence against those practising religious faiths” since 2016, and calls on the Eritrean Government to put an end to the “detention of the opposition, journalists, religious leaders and innocent civilians”. The resolution also calls for all prisoners of conscience to be released “immediately and unconditionally”, demanding that the Eritrean government supplies detailed information on “all those deprived of physical liberty.”

Specific reference is made to the cases of Dawit Isaak, one of ten journalists detained incommunicado since 2001, and of the legitimate Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios, who has been under incommunicado house arrest since 2007, and is reported to be suffering from ill-health after allegedly being poisoned. Also mentioned by name is Eritrea’s former foreign minister Petros Solomon, one of 11 politicians detained incommunicado since 2001 for calling for political reform.

In the resolution, the EP expresses “its full support” for the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Eritrea, stating that unhindered access to the country must be extended to “international and regional human rights bodies, including special rapporteurs”, to enable the monitoring of improvements in human rights.

The strongly-worded resolution highlights a continuing dissonance within the EU and its institutions with regard to Eritrea. Not only does it reference the finding by the UN Commission of Inquiry on human rights in Eritrea (COIE) that Eritrea’s shoot-to-kill border policy may constitute a crime against humanity; it also urges Eritrea to end ‘guilt-by-association’ policies whereby families of escapees are detained. In contrast, during the recently concluded 35th Human Rights Council (HRC) session several European nations were at the forefront of unsuccessful attempts to remove any mention of these violations from the final resolution, and to minimise references to the COIE.

The resolution also denounces the resumption of “major EU aid to Eritrea” and particularly, the approval in 2016 of 200 million Euros under the National Indicative Programme (NIP), which occurred despite the EP’s reservations and recommendations. Emphasising the fact that Eritrea’s partnership with the EU is governed by the Cotonou

Agreement, which describes “good governance” as a fundamental element of partnership, the resolution calls on the EC to review its scrutiny arrangements with the EP, insisting the Commission obtains guarantees from Eritrea that democratic reforms will be implemented, and human rights ensured.

In addition, while the Commission’s migration policies have involved partnering with Eritrea to stem the flow of refugees and asylum seekers, the EP resolution urges EU Member States not to return Eritreans seeking asylum in Europe as they are likely to be detained and tortured. It also urges EU member states to prevent the collection of the 2% diaspora tax within their borders, and calls on the EU to collaborate with the UN and the African Union to “closely monitor the overall situation in Eritrea and to report all cases of violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms”.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We warmly welcome the EP resolution, which not only encompasses the wide scope of violations underway in Eritrea, but also addresses worrying aspects of EU policy. In particular, a migration policy that appears to address the refugee crisis in terms by prioritising a development-oriented partnership with a government whose officials stand accused of committing the atrocity crimes and other violations that drive the exodus. In light of the continuing and severe violations underway in Eritrea, CSW urges a re-assessment of the EU-Eritrea partnership to ensure compliance with the Cotonou Agreement, with regard to human rights and democratisation. We also reiterate the call for the release of all of Eritrea’s prisoners of conscience without precondition.”

Eritrea arrests another 22 Christians

By World Watch Monitor (16.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2tDRNET> - The number of Eritrean Christians arrested since the beginning of May has risen to more than 120, according to charities Open Doors and Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW).

World Watch Monitor first reported on the fresh wave of arrests on 26 May, at which stage over 90 people had been arrested. Now a further 22 arrests have been confirmed at the end of May and the beginning of June.

Seventeen Christian men were arrested in the Godaif neighbourhood of the capital, Asmara, on 28 May. A further five Christians were taken from their homes in Dongolo on 6 June.

Open Doors reported that this brings the number to at least 121 since the beginning of May. CSW has the number at 122.

Evangelicals and Pentecostals have been at particular risk in Eritrea since a 2002 law was passed prohibiting Christian practice outside the Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran denominations, and also Sunni Islam.

The fresh wave of arrests began in the days leading up to Eritrea’s Independence Day, 24 May. Many Christians find themselves under added scrutiny around the time of Independence Day celebrations because they are reluctant to participate in ceremonies that go against their conscience.

A source told World Watch Monitor that 49 Evangelicals were arrested outside the capital, Asmara, on 21 May at a post-wedding celebration called a “Hamauti”, which takes place a week after the wedding at the home of the newly-weds and enables the parents-in-law,

friends and other relatives to eat, sing, dance and pray together. The couple, Tedro Negel and his wife, in their late 20s, were among those arrested.

On 17 May, security officials arrested more than 35 Christians from their homes in Adi Quala, a market town 16 miles (25 km) from the Ethiopian border, in the country's Southern Region. They are being held in different cells in the local police. The arrests came after security officials with representatives of the Orthodox Church started a compulsory house-to-house search on 15 May.

A group consisting of an Orthodox Church official, an assistant, a local administration officer and a security official visited all the homes in Adi Quala. They told the residents they were verifying food vouchers, but when residents presented their vouchers, the officials insisted that all family members assemble and indicate whether they were Muslim, Jehovah's Witnesses, or members of the Orthodox Church, Lutheran Church, Catholic Church or Pentecostal Church. The next day the security officers went door to door in Adi Quala to arrest all who indicated that they were Pentecostals.

A source told World Watch Monitor that similar searches were conducted in several parts of the Central Region, adding: "Those who identified themselves as Pentecostals in the Central Region have not been arrested but the level of fear amongst the believers has greatly increased."

On 9 May, officials arrested ten Christians from a home in Ginda, north-east of Asmara. Sources said neighbours had reported to local leaders in the town that Christians were holding meetings there.

Since the 2002 law, members of outlawed churches have taken to meeting in secret in people's homes, but are targeted by the authorities. Over the past 15 years, countless homes have been raided and local sources estimate that hundreds of Christians are being held for long periods in Eritrea's prisons, while thousands have been held for shorter periods.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide has listed at least 28 Christians who have died during their incarceration or shortly after their release as a result of their harsh treatment in prison or of the withholding of medical treatment to religious prisoners. Christians who have been imprisoned recount facing torture, hard labour and being held in filthy conditions and given insufficient food. Some have been held in metal shipping containers – and although researchers at Open Doors said they are not aware of any Christians currently held in shipping containers, journalists and opposition politicians are held in those. They continue to face extreme heat during the day, freezing temperatures at night, and a lack of oxygen, hygiene and privacy.

Many Christians who are jailed are released only after admitting to having broken the law that prohibits Christians from gathering outside registered and recognised groups. Sources explain that, depending on the prison head at each location, prisoners are asked to sign one of two agreements. Either they promise not to engage in unlicensed religious activities, which many are happy to sign, or they are asked to renounce their allegiance to Christ. Those who refuse to sign can be held for years, even decades.

Eritrea is ranked as the tenth most difficult country in which to be a Christian, according to the 2017 Open Doors World Watch List.

122 Christians detained in May

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has been informed that 122 Eritrean Christians were detained in May 2017 in a series of round-ups of members of unregistered denominations in various locations around the country.

CSW (15.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2ss5tp8> - The detentions mark a new phase in a crackdown that has been ongoing since May 2002, when the Eritrean government effectively outlawed religious practices not affiliated with the Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran and Orthodox Christian denominations or Sunni Islam.

Forty-five Christians, including entire families, elderly men and a disabled woman, were taken from their homes in Adi Quala town in the south of the country and transported to Adi Aglis detention camp. The arrests left 23 children without their parents.

Fifteen Christians were arrested in Gindae town in the Northern Red Sea Region, in an ongoing operation that has forced others to flee to safer areas.

In the Godaif district of the capital Asmara, 17 Christians were rounded up on 28 May 2017. Forty-five others, mostly women, had been rounded up a week earlier in another part of the city as they gathered at a party arranged by a recently married couple. Further arrests are anticipated as local district committees, composed of members of the security services, the ruling party, the local administration and the Orthodox Church, continue their house to house inquiries. Christians in the city have begun a period of prayer and fasting for peace and safety.

In her latest report to the Human Rights Council (HRC), Sheila B. Keetharuth, the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Eritrea, noted that "the practice of arbitrary arrest and detention of individuals based on their religious belief continues," and referenced earlier arrests in Ghindae and Adi Quala, as well as the continuing detention of Patriarch Antonios of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. Amongst the report's recommendations is a call for the immediate and unconditional release of "all those unlawfully and arbitrarily detained, including members of the G-15, journalists and members of religious groups."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said: "These arrests signify a renewed intensity in the crackdown that has been ongoing since 2002, and are a clear indication that the severe repression of freedom of religion or belief continues unabated in Eritrea. In her latest report, the Special Rapporteur noted that Eritrea has ignored the bulk of recommendations from her previous reports, while those made by the Commission of Inquiry have gone unheeded. In view of the continuing violations and lack of cooperation, we call on the HRC to support the renewal of the Special Rapporteur's mandate, and also to urge the international community to ensure that perpetrators of crimes against humanity are held accountable, including through universal jurisdiction, whenever this is appropriate."

100 Christians detained, 10 years after Eritrea put Patriarch under house arrest

World Watch Monitor (26.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2qs1ynu> - The Eritrean government has stepped up its campaign against Christians, arresting almost 100 in the past month.

The arrests come as Christians in the repressive East African country mark ten years since government officials placed the Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch under house arrest and incommunicado, and 15 years since the forced closure of many churches.

Patriarch (Abune) Antonios, who turns 90 in July, is diabetic and family and friends fear he is not receiving adequate medical treatment. The location of his incarceration remains.

He was taken on 27 May 2007, and on the same day the government installed Bishop Dioskoros of Mendefera in his place, violating the Church's constitution. (The Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch is traditionally appointed by Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Pope, for life.) Although he died in 2015, no new successor has been appointed.

Patriarch Antonios' relationship with the government had deteriorated in 2006 when he refused to excommunicate 3,000 members of the Medhane Alem Orthodox Sunday School revival movement, and demanded that the government release imprisoned Christians accused of treason. In January 2007 the regime moved to strip the Patriarch of his title, confiscating his vestments, his sceptre and other sacramental items. However, he is still recognised as canonical patriarch by the Eritrean Churches in Diaspora and by Oriental Orthodox Churches.

Evangelicals and Pentecostals have been at particular risk since a 2002 law was passed prohibiting Churches other than the Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and also Sunni Islam. However, as the Patriarch's incarceration shows, members of permitted Churches are also at risk if they criticise the regime.

At a vigil in London earlier this month, Dr Berhane Asmelash, Director of Release Eritrea, said: "Our government started arresting Jehovah Witnesses. At that time, we said nothing because we felt they deserved to be persecuted. Then they started to persecute the handicap[ped], the ex-fighter handicapped. Some of them were shot. At that time we said nothing because we weren't one of them ... I was in Eritrea when our government started to arrest journalists and some political prisoners, and we said nothing – because we thought they were all the same. Then, in 2002, they started to shut churches and arrest Christians and we thought our government was going to release them. But after 15 years things are getting worse."

Elizabeth Chyrum of Human Rights Concern-Eritrea said: "Sixty thousand Eritreans flee their country every year – more than from any other African country – and yet the world's media ... continues to call them "migrants", shutting its eyes to [Eritrea's] imprisonment without trial, torture, persecution of believers, and, above all, lifetime National Service for every young man or woman over 18 years of age, condemned to endless years in the armed forces, or "slave".

The fresh wave of arrests took place earlier this month in the days leading up to Eritrea's Independence Day, 24 May. Many Christians find themselves under added scrutiny around the time of Independence Day celebrations because they are reluctant to participate in ceremonies that go against their conscience.

A source told World Watch Monitor that 49 Evangelicals were arrested outside the capital, Asmara, on Sunday (21 May) at a post-wedding celebration called a Hamauti . A Hamauti takes place a week after the wedding at the home of the newly-weds and enables the parents-in-law, friends and other relatives to eat, sing, dance and pray together. The couple, Tedro Negel and his wife, in their late 20s, were among those arrested.

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the country's Southern Region. They are being held in different cells in the local police . The arrests came after security officials with representatives of the Orthodox Church started a compulsory house-to-house search on 15 May.

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