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Government clampdown sparks protest in Eritrea

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (03.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2yWYMjq> - On 20 October, Hajji Musa Mohammed Nur, a nonagenarian and the respected Honorary President of Al Diaa Islamic School in Asmara, was arrested, along with several others who were taken into custody in diverse parts of the city. All had expressed opposition to the government's decision to expropriate the Al Diaa Islamic School in line with a plan devised by the Ministry of Education in 2014 that will transfer control of every school to local communities. Al Diaa was established in the late 1960s, and is run by parent committees as a private Islamic school. Transferring schools to the control of local communities would mean that religious schools such as Al Diaa would become nondenominational and be open to the public.

Prior to his arrest, thousands of people had gathered in the school compound on 15 October to be briefed by Hajji Musa and other board members on the issue and to express their rejection of the proposed expropriation. According to Gedab news, a few weeks earlier the security forces had also detained a dozen people at a funeral in Adi Guedad on the outskirts of Asmara, as they returned from the burial.

On 31 October, students gathered in the Akhria neighbourhood in the north of Asmara requesting the release of Hajji Musa and other detainees. As their numbers grew, security personnel allegedly began to assault them indiscriminately. The protestors eventually responded by throwing stones, and the security personnel countered by opening fire using live ammunition. Footage continues to emerge of troops shooting at and chasing unarmed civilians through the streets of the capital. Security personnel are also alleged to have arbitrarily detained young people. Claims by opposition groups of 28 casualties could not be independently verified. However, in an indication of the seriousness of the situation, the United States (US) Embassy in Asmara issued a security message to US citizens on 31 October stating it had "received reports of gunfire in several locations in Asmara due to protests" and advising them to "avoid the downtown where protests appear to be more prevalent."

According to the Asmara-based activist network Arbi Harnet, the school has been "quietly" reopened and a few students and women have been released. However, some reportedly suffered mistreatment while in detention.

The Catholic Church has been targeted in a similar manner. According to a report on the Eritrean website Asmarino.com, on 18 September, the Education Minister for the Central

Region (Zoba Ma'ekel) wrote to the Director of the Medhane Alem Secondary School in Asmara demanding the closure of the school and a list of all of its students. The letter, which was copied to the Minister of Education, the office of the Eritrean Police and the Chief of Police of Zoba Ma'ekel, cited Proclamation 73 of 1995, which defines and regulates the activities of religious groups. Amongst other things, the proclamation states that the provision of social amenities rests within the remit of the government, while religious organisations should confine themselves to attending to the spiritual wellbeing of adherents. Following an unfruitful appeal to officials, church leaders decided not to close the school. The government's response was to detain Abba Haile Paulos, a diocesan priest who volunteered to take the place of the school's director, and Sr. Tinsae, a Comboni nun.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) said: "The targeting of educational establishments belonging to two of the faith communities which are permitted to function in the country is indicative of an enduring unwillingness to respect and protect both the right to education and the right of freedom of religion or belief. There can no longer be any doubt about the true nature of the Eritrean regime; a government that can fire live ammunition in broad daylight at unarmed protestors, most of whom are school children, is more than capable of committing the atrocity crimes for which it stands accused. We reiterate our call for renewed international efforts towards establishing justice mechanisms to hold perpetrators to account. We also reiterate the fact that the desire to escape unremitting, comprehensive and severe human rights violations is at the heart of Eritrea's refugee exodus. We urge the international community once again to respect the principle of non-refoulement, and to ensure sanctuary and protection to Eritreans who have fled their country."

Christian mother dies in prison

CSW (11.08.2017) - <http://www.csw.org.uk/2017/08/11/news/3670/article.htm> - Fikadu Debesay, who was detained with her husband in May during **raids targeting Evangelical Christians** in Adi Quala town, Eritrea, has died in incarceration.

The mother of three reportedly died earlier this week in Metkel Abiet, a desert camp situated between the towns of Gahtelai and Shieb in the Northern Red Sea Region, and was buried on 10 August in Mendefera. While the cause of her death is as yet unknown, the camp where she was detained is situated in an area known for its oppressive heat and aridity.

A campaign of house to house raids targeting members of non-sanctioned churches was initiated in several towns in May this year. This marks a significant intensification of 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.

Arrests are occurring monthly. During the first week of August, 23 Christians were rounded up in the capital city, Asmara. In July, 16 female national service conscripts in their late teens were taken from their place of assignment in Adi Halo, a village 20 miles from Asmara, and detained in Metkel Abiet camp. Other Christians and family members who attempted to visit them were also imprisoned. The detainees' hair was forcibly shaved off in what local sources describe as an additional "sign of humiliation in a society where a 'woman's hair is regarded as a sign of decency and sanity'.

In an indication of the harshness of prison conditions, a woman who had been detained after being arrested at her home in Nefasit in early June is reported to have become mentally ill.

The number of Christians known to have been detained in desert camps and military facilities since May has now risen to 210. Most were detained following raids on their homes, while a few were arrested at prayer meetings. Like Fikadu Debesay, several are parents, and according to local sources, **over 50 children** are currently without one or both parents as a result of these raids.

Concerns expressed for the wellbeing of Patriarch Antonios

CSW (19.07.2017) - Concerns are being expressed regarding the wellbeing of the patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church (EOC), as further information emerges of the circumstances surrounding his first public appearance since his house arrest in 2007.

According to local sources, Patriarch Antonios was surrounded by guards during Mass at St Mary's Cathedral in Asmara on 16 July, while plain-clothed policemen dissuaded church goers from taking pictures. The patriarch's first public appearance for over a decade followed the publication, on the EOC official website, of a letter from the church's Holy Synod stating that the rift caused by his removal from office was over. Also published were pictures of the patriarch and a reconciliation committee consisting of members of the "Union of the Monasteries and Church Scholars", who had participated in a process that had allegedly ended in "full reconciliation". Significantly, while the signatures of the other attendees appear on the letter, the patriarch's does not.

In August 2016, the same website published pictures of a purported reconciliation meeting and a letter alleging that Patriarch Antonios had apologised for events leading to his removal from office. After the details of story were debunked by several credible sources, the conditions of his house arrest were reportedly made even more stringent.

Contrary to church protocol, the patriarch played no part in the 16 July church service. Instead, a statement from the reconciliation committee was reportedly read out to the congregation by a deacon, and the service was billed as a celebration of this reconciliation. According to the statement, the patriarch had been removed from office because of his association with heretical teaching and for exceeding his authority, presumably by questioning unwarranted government interference in church affairs. It also articulated Abune Antonios' rejection of these charges. He did so initially in a strongly-worded letter of rebuttal written immediately after his removal from office, and has maintained this stance throughout the reconciliation process.

Abune Antonios has yet to speak about or issue an independent statement on the reconciliation process or its outcome. According to Arbi Harnet (Freedom Friday), a network of activists inside Eritrea, the congregation was also informed the patriarch was unwell and thus would not address those assembled. This is particularly concerning, given recent reports alleging that he had been injected with a substance on or around 7 May 2017 that had caused him to fall gravely ill. When the service was over, instead of being returned to his official residence, the patriarch was confined in another house where he is reportedly surrounded by armed guards.

Patriarch Antonios, who is 90 years old, has been under house arrest since January 2007, after being removed from office, in violation of canon law, for repeatedly objecting to government interference in ecclesiastical affairs. His removal cemented the government's control of the EOC, and his reappearance in public followed mounting international pressure.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "Sadly, as information filters through from Eritrea, it is becoming apparent that Abune Antonios may not have been released, let alone reinstated. Instead, his reappearance increasingly seems to be part of an official attempt to seize control of the narrative following a wave of international pressure for his release, and to provide a fig leaf for individuals, nations, businesses and organisations that seek to engage with the regime in spite of its appalling human rights record.

"Patriarch Antonios, who suffers from diabetes and high blood pressure, has been detained incommunicado for a lengthy period and for no legitimate reason. CSW calls once again for his unconditional release and reinstatement, and echoes the request from the EOC Diocese of North America for the presence of representatives from sisterly Oriental Orthodox churches to observe and confirm the reconciliation process. We also urge the international community not only to make urgent representations with the Eritrean authorities regarding the patriarch's current situation, but to also hold them accountable for his continued wellbeing, reminding them his removal from office constitutes unlawful interference in church affairs and calling for his immediate release and restoration."

For further information or to arrange interviews please contact Kiri Kankhwende, Senior Press Officer at Christian Solidarity Worldwide on +44 (0)20 8329 0045 / +44 (0) 78 2332 9663, email kiri@csw.org.uk or visit www.csw.org.uk.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is a Christian organisation working for religious freedom through advocacy and human rights, in the pursuit of justice.

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.

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On Tuesday 9 May, officials arrested 10 Christians from a home in Ginda, north-east of Asmara. The ten – four women and six men – are being held at the Ginda Police Station. Sources said neighbours had reported to local leaders in the town that Christians were holding meetings there.

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