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Eritrea: Orthodox Christians in prison

– HRWF (19.06.2020) – Despite state recognition, the Eritrean Orthodox Church and its Patriarch have been heavily persecuted since Eritrea became independent from Ethiopia in 1991.[1] The newly independent government wanted a national Orthodox Church separate from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and so asked Pope Shenouda III of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria for Eritrean Orthodoxy autocephaly.[2]

In 2004, Abune Antonios was elected as Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. He opposed the government's interference in the affairs of the church and objected its confiscation of church properties, hijacking of church offerings, expropriation of tithes and pressuring priests and deacons to military services. The government deposed him, put him under house arrest in 2006 and appointed a new, more obedient, Patriarch.

This context explains the persecution of Abune ANtonios and those who are faithful to him.

Orthodox Christians behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 April 2020, HRWF documented four cases of Eritrean Orthodox Christians in its Prisoners' Database.[3] Three of these individuals are in maximum-security detention centres and one is under house arrest, Patriarch Abune Antonios. Before their arrest, these members occupied high level positions within Eritrea, until they were arrested for involvement in the renewal movement of the Orthodox Church. The number of cases documented by HRWF has not changed over the last couple of years.

Articles of the Penal Code

Quite often believers of all faiths are arrested and imprisoned without any formal charges, trial or conviction.

International advocacy

On 6 July 2017, the **European Parliament** adopted a resolution on the cases of Abune Antonios and Dawit Isaak. The resolution stated that:

Abune Antonios, the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the nation's largest religious community, has been in detention since 2007, having refused to excommunicate 3000 parishioners who opposed the government [...] since then, he has been held in an unknown location where he has been denied medical care.

The European Parliament called 'on the Eritrean Government to release Abune Antonios, allow him to return to his position as Patriarch, and cease its interference in peaceful religious practices in the country'. Additionally, it reiterated 'that freedom of religion is a fundamental right, and strongly condemned any violence or discrimination on grounds of religion'.[4]

In its 2018 Annual Report, the **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)** expressed its concern for the continuation of religious repression in the country and highlighted the domination of the government in the internal affairs of the four recognised religious communities, including the Orthodox Church of Eritrea. USCIRF determined that Eritrea merited designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. USCIRF has designated

Eritrea as a CPC since 2004.[5]

On 21 June 2019, the **UN Human Rights Council** issued a press release by Special Rapporteur Daniela Kravetz about human rights in Eritrea, especially the government's crackdowns on various religious communities. Concerning the arrest of Orthodox believers, she said that on 13 June 2019 that 'security forces arrested five Orthodox priests from the Debre Bizen monastery. The priests - three over 70 years old - were allegedly arrested for opposing the government's interference in the affairs of the Church'.[6] She also pressed the government to 'release those who have been imprisoned for their religious beliefs'.[7]

As of 15 June 2020, there were 63 FoRB prisoners in Eritrea in HRWF's Prisoners' Database

Jehovah's Witnesses: 55

Coptic Orthodox: 4

Protestants: 4

See details of these documented cases at <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database/>

[1] "Eritrean War of Independence," New World Encyclopedia, accessed June, 2020. https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Eritrean_War_of_Independence.

[2] Stefon, Matt, "Shenouda III," Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., March 13, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Shenouda-III>.

[3] Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned Orthodox Christians, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database/>.

[4] European Parliament, Resolution on Eritrea, notably the cases of Abune Antonios and Dawit Isaak (2017/2755(RSP)) July 6, 2017. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0309_EN.html.

[5] United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended countries of particular concern: Eritrea 2018, 2018. https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_ERITREA.pdf.

[6] "UN Expert Urges Eritrea to Allow Religious Institutions to Operate Freely and Respect

the Right of Freedom of Religion,” OHCHR, June 21, 2019.
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24721&LangID=E>.

[7] “Crackdown on Christians in Eritrea Spurs UN Expert to Press Government ‘to Live up to Its International Commitments’ UN News,” United Nations, June 21, 2019.

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/06/1041041>.
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