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Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses receives unprecedented international attention

JW.org (19.10.2016) - It is in Eritrea, more than anywhere else in the world, that Jehovah's Witnesses experience the most intense persecution. Since Eritrea gained independence in 1993, the Witnesses have been consistently imprisoned, tortured, and marginalized. They are persecuted because they remain politically neutral and refuse to take up arms against their fellow man.

Fifty-four of Jehovah's Witnesses are currently imprisoned in Eritrea. Over the past 22 years, all except one have been held without formal charges or a hearing. Three have been in prison since 1994 for their conscientious objection to military service.

Worldwide concern increases

Since the persecution began, human rights organizations and government agencies have condemned the suffering experienced by Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea. More recently, however, the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea (COIE), a UN mandated body, has brought unprecedented international attention to the plight of the Witnesses. In its first report released in June 2015 to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), the COIE dedicated a section to the discriminatory and abusive treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses.

On June 21, 2016, the COIE presented its second detailed report to the HRC. The COIE urged Eritrea to "respect freedom of religion or belief" and to "put an end to the practice of arbitrary arrest and detention of individuals based on their religious beliefs, in particular followers of specific religious groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, . . . and release immediately and unconditionally all those unlawfully and arbitrarily detained."

In its findings, the COIE concluded that Eritrea's "persecution on both religious and ethnic grounds" is contrary to international law and constitutes a "crime against humanity." The international community considers this persecution as one of the gravest human rights violations. The COIE will present an oral update to the UN General Assembly on October 27, 2016.

Will Eritrea remedy its unjust treatment of the Witnesses?

The international community of Jehovah's Witnesses is deeply concerned about their fellow believers in Eritrea. They earnestly appeal to the government of Eritrea to stop persecuting these sincere Christians and allow them to enjoy their fundamental and inalienable rights.

Doubts cast on report of patriarch apology

CSW (15.08.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2bBlrnJ> - Doubts have been cast on the veracity of a report circulating via social media that the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church has apologised to the Church Synod and spoken positively of the government's role in efforts to reconcile the church.

His Holiness Abune Antonios has been held incommunicado under house arrest since January 2006, when he was forced out of office in violation of canon law following an illegally convened meeting of the Holy Synod. He had been resisting the government's increasing encroachment in church affairs, had refused to excommunicate 3,000 members of the Orthodox Church's renewal movement and had demanded the release of three prominent Orthodox priests who have been detained incommunicado and without charge since November 2004. In a further contravention of canon law Patriarch Antonios was replaced in 2007 by a government-approved appointee who was never recognised by the Orthodox papacy, and who died on 31 December 2015 after a prolonged period of ill-health.

On 8 August, the Eritrean Orthodox Church website in Asmara published pictures of Patriarch Antonios in a meeting with a delegation of monks and scholars and government officials. The website also published a letter on headed paper that claimed he had signed a letter apologising for any intentional or unintended wrongs he may have committed that led to his removal, had expressed regrets regarding the consequences on the church.

However, credible sources have informed Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) that the delegation had initially visited the patriarch on 5 August, ostensibly to apologise for their part in his illegal removal and to begin the process of reconciliation. The Patriarch was subsequently transported to the Patriarchate in Asmara on 8 August for further discussions, and the pictures were taken at that time. The Diaspora Archdiocese of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church (North America, Europe and the Middle East) has also cast doubt on the veracity of the report, highlighting the absence of a written or oral statement from the patriarch himself confirming this version of events. The Diaspora Archdiocese's statement also affirmed that "No statement of 'reconciliation' can be taken at face value where the venue is not free from any duress and without the participation of a neutral third party. Furthermore, the synod, with the full backing of the government, cannot be the accusing party, the judge, and now the agent to declare 'reconciliation.'"

Several contacts drew attention to the fact the Patriarchs' case has assumed an increasingly high profile as Eritrea's severe human rights crisis has come under greater international scrutiny, with some suggesting this report may be a ploy to provide an illusion of progress: "They want to show it's a new era; then they will kill him. There is a big drama of reconciliation, then people die mysteriously. Many Eritreans have been killed like that."

The Patriarch's continued imprisonment is highlighted in the final report of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on human rights in Eritrea (COIE), which found that crimes against humanity have been committed there in a "widespread and systematic manner" since 1991, including the crime of persecution against religious and ethnic groups. A subsequent Human Rights Commission (HRC) resolution adopted on 1 July leaves open the possibility of further action, including by the Security Council, by requesting the submission of the report to all relevant UN bodies "for consideration and appropriate action" in order to ensure accountability for human rights violations, including crimes against humanity.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "While any genuine initiative to reinstate Abune Antonios and reconcile the church would have been warmly welcomed, the

information we have received so far suggests this report has been fabricated to deflect criticism of Eritrea's appalling human rights record by providing an illusion of progress. In reality, the continued detention of the legitimate leader of the largest permitted Christian denomination is a clear indication of the government's obsessive determination to monitor, suppress and control every religious community. CSW continues to call for the unconditional release and reinstatement of Abune Antonios. He is a severely diabetic octogenarian and the Eritrean Government must be held accountable for ensuring his safety and access to medication. It is vital that the international community maintains pressure on the regime until every prisoner of conscience is freed without precondition, victims of human rights violations receive redress and those responsible for the grave crimes perpetrated in the country are held to justice."

A UN report denounces crimes against humanity

HRWF (13.06.2016) - A new [report](#) from the United Nations says "systematic, gross and widespread crimes against humanity", including abuses of religious freedom, have been committed in Eritrea and should be investigated by the International Criminal Court. A section of the report is devoted to discrimination on religious or ethnic grounds.

Discrimination on religious or ethnic grounds

113. In its first report, the Commission found that the Government controls freedom of religion tightly. Only four religious denominations are recognised: Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholicism, Lutheran Evangelical, and Sunni Islam. Religious practice by members of non-authorized religious groups is prohibited and subject to repression. Following a 2002 decree requiring registration of all religions seeking authorisation to practice, a number of smaller religious groups attempted to register. To date, they have not received authorisation.

114. The Government of Eritrea has responded to allegations of religious discrimination as follows:

"Eritrea is a secular state. Religious freedom is indeed guaranteed by law. Eritrea has also a rich history of religious tolerance, co-existence and harmony in a turbulent region that is often wracked by acute religious polarization and strife... Even within the confines of secularism, the government of Eritrea has obligations to ensure that centuries-old religious tolerance and harmony is not perturbed by externally-induced new trends of Islamic or Christian fundamentalism that corrode the social fabric. The Government thus introduced administrative regulations in 2002 that basically request new faiths to declare their sources of funding. Most of the miniscule new faiths did not want to comply with the regulations because they have external funding."

115. With respect to Jehovah's Witnesses in particular the Government has stated that "Jehovah's Witnesses had long forfeited their legal status when they refused to recognize the 'temporal government' after liberation and the referendum process".

116. A number of witnesses told the Commission that members of non-authorized religious groups continue to suffer acute discrimination. A witness told the Commission:

"I left Eritrea on 20 January 2016 because I was not able to practice my religion freely and I was detained many times for being a member of [a non-recognised religion]. I was detained the last time on 9 March 2014. We were 58 people, including women and children, worshipping together when the military police stormed the premises and arrested us all. They took us to [the local] police

prison. They beat us very badly and many of us sustained injuries. When we arrived at this prison we met 50 other Protestants from [a banned church] detained for practicing their faith [...] On 29 March 2014, 11 of us refused to renounce our faith, so were transferred to an underground prison. On 27 April 2014, five persons agreed to renounce their faith and were released after signing documents saying that they were now members of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. On 5 May 2015, we were transferred to a military prison [...] In all, we were 108 religious prisoners in this prison. I was beaten once there because I refused to renounce my religion. On 12 November 2015, while working in the garden, I managed to escape. Persecution on religious ground has not improved and people are still being arrested for worshipping. I know that many of those arrested have died in their respective prisons due to torture and pneumonia, for which some have been forbidden proper medical treatment. Protestants detained are only released after denouncing their faith and promising to worship in the Eritrean Orthodox Church.”

117. Government control of authorised religious groups also persists. The Government of Eritrea continues to detain under house arrest Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonio, who was arrested over ten years ago for calling for the release of political prisoners and failing to excommunicate church members opposed to the Government. The Commission was also able to corroborate reports that over ten Orthodox priests were detained in April 2016 for protesting his continued detention and expressing concern about Government plans to appoint a new Patriarch following the death of Abune Dioskoros who was appointed by the Government following the detention of Patriarch Abune Antonio.

118. The Commission also received reports of forcible evictions of members of the Afar ethnic group, and arbitrary arrests of members of the Kunama ethnic group, in late 2015 and 2016, which require further investigation.

119. The Commission recognises that there is a considerable degree of religious harmony among those religious denominations authorised in Eritrea. Nonetheless, Eritrea’s persistent discrimination against persons belonging to unrecognised religious groups constitute violations of Article 486 of Eritrea’s Transitional Penal Code, Articles 2, 18 and 26 of the ICCPR, and Articles 2 and 8 of the ACHPR. It may also violate articles of the ICERD. As will be discussed in more detail below, the Commission has concluded that many of the acts of discrimination constitute the crime against humanity of persecution.

Eritrean church leaders still in jail 12 years later

World Watch Monitor (13.04.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1SCtCLy> - Although the tiny East African nation of Eritrea has a population of just 6 million, Eritrea is one of the leading sources of refugees in Europe. There are many reasons for this, but chief among them is a lack of religious freedom.

The Eritrean government outlawed worship outside of Islam and the Orthodox, Evangelical Lutheran and Roman Catholic Church in 2002, driving all other Christian churches underground as they faced varying degrees of restrictions and attacks. Since then, thousands of Christians have been arrested and incarcerated without benefitting from a legal process. Among them are a number of prominent church leaders arrested in 2004, who remain incarcerated today, almost 12 years later. World Watch Monitor spoke with the family of one of these prisoners.

Haile Naigzhi, leader of Eritrea’s Full Gospel Church, was arrested during the early hours of 23 May, 2004. He was taken from his home to Police Station #1 in Asmara, then moved to Wongel Mermera – a dungeon-like prison in Asmara, where he still resides,

alongside at least five other prominent church leaders (see list below). They have little hope of release any time soon.

For years following Naigzhi's arrest, his wife and three children (names withheld to protect their identity) waited for his release. In 2013, his wife received credible information that the government wanted to arrest her and the children, so she decided to flee.

As World Watch Monitor [reported](#) last year, the journey out of Eritrea is fraught with danger. Movement in Eritrea is heavily controlled through an internal travel-pass system and checkpoints; anyone trying to cross the border can be shot on sight. If you make it past those first two hurdles, you reach the desert, exposed to the unforgiving elements and lawless human traffickers. Whatever destination you aim for after that could see you either crossing the Mediterranean on a rickety boat or dodging deportation from African countries with diplomatic and ideological ties to the Eritrean government.

World Watch Monitor cannot divulge the details of the Naigzhi family's journey, nor where they ended up, but today they are settled in a new country, where they have been granted asylum.

"We feel safer here," said Naigzhi's wife. "We are able to freely serve God. I am also happy because the children are in a good school."

But their 19-year-old daughter misses home. "Ever since we left our country, things have dramatically changed in a way we didn't know they would. I knew the moment we left that we would have an uphill battle until we are able one day to go back home again. And it was all true."

Naigzhi's wife added: "I miss my husband dearly. It is very lonely for me."

Their eldest daughter last saw her father when she was seven, whereas the youngest son (13) does not remember a time when they were all together.

The other boy, 17, last saw his father when he was five and confessed to also feeling homesick.

"I miss home, I miss my friends, and I miss our house," he said.

"It is difficult, but we hold on to Jesus," said Naigzhi's wife.

Her daughter added: "We learnt that having a 'bed-of-roses' kind of life on earth is not actually God's number one plan for us, but that everything we face in this world shapes our spirits into the beautiful spirit the Lord wishes to see in us. I am happy in every way and most especially to be the daughter of the Most High God. I am also happy to be the daughter of a prisoner for Christ. He is the best dad ever! God will make things perfect one day, and I trust Him with all my heart. He is faithful to keep His word."

Eritrea is No. 3 on Open Doors' 2016 World Watch List, which ranks the 50 countries in which it is most difficult to live as a Christian. No-one knows for certain how many Christians remain in the elaborate network of incarceration centres in Eritrea. Although there seems to have been a lull in arrests, pressure remains high on Christians and on society in general. Thousands are still intent on fleeing the country, the majority aiming for Europe. Hundreds have died trying.

Incarcerated church leaders

Abune Antonios

Head of the Orthodox Church, removed from his position in 2007 after criticising the Eritrean government for interference in church activities. Two priests accompanied by government security agents entered the Patriarch's residence and confiscated his personal pontifical insignia. He was replaced by Abune Dioskoros – a development orchestrated by the Eritrean government. Patriarch Antonios, who has never been charged with any offence, remains under house arrest and strict state surveillance.

Ogbamichael Teklehaimanot

Senior pastor of the Kale Hiwot Church. Arrested for participating in a Protestant wedding ceremony in Barentu on 9 January, 2005. Taken to Asmara Police Station No. 5, then subjected to 10 months of solitary confinement and hard labour at Sawa military camp. Released after six years, then re-arrested six months later, after a fleeing church member, who was being monitored, called him. Now back in prison in Barentu, where he has been for 11 years in total.

Kidane Weldou

Senior pastor of the Full Gospel Church and member of the executive committee of Gideons International in Eritrea. When his vehicle was found abandoned in 2005, his wife and four children assumed he had been arrested. Believed to be in Wongel Mermera prison.

Haile Naigzhi

Leader of Eritrea's Full Gospel Church, arrested at his home during the early hours of 23 May, 2004, and taken to Police Station #1 in Asmara.

Kiflu Gebremeskel

Founder and senior pastor of Southwest Full Gospel Church, and member of the executive committee to the Full Gospel Church of Eritrea. Before he became a full-time pastor, Dr. Gebremeskel was also a mathematics lecturer and until 1999 was department and faculty head at the University of Asmara. Has a Ph.D. in mathematics from Chicago University. Taken from his home in Asmara Gejeret in May 2004. Wife and four children have not been able to visit him.

Meron Gebreselasie

Anaesthetist and pastor of Massawa Rhema Church. Arrested on 3 June, 2004, five days after another pastor, Tesfasion Hagos (who has since been released and granted asylum in another country), visited his church and home. Arrested at a police checkpoint just before entering Asmara, as he was returning Pastor Hagos' belongings to his home. Taken to the 2nd Police Station, where he was held for about two months, before being relocated to Wongel Mermera, where he remains. Unmarried.

Futsum Gebrenegus

Eritrea's only psychiatrist. Also served as an Orthodox priest. Arrested in Nov. 2004 for allegedly being involved in the renewal movement within the Orthodox Church.

Gebremedhin Gebregiorsis

Expert theologian and Orthodox priest also arrested in Nov. 2004 for allegedly being involved in the renewal movement within the Orthodox Church.

Tekleab Menghisteab

Doctor and Orthodox priest also arrested in Nov. 2004 for alleged involvement in the renewal movement within the Orthodox Church.

USCIRF: Release Eritrean orthodox patriarch Abune Antonios

USCIRF (19.01.2016) - <http://1.usa.gov/1Og7eti> - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) solemnly marks the 10 year anniversary tomorrow of the illegal removal and detention of Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios as head of the Eritrean Orthodox Church.

"USCIRF calls on the Eritrean government to immediately release Patriarch Antonios and allow him to return to his rightful position as head of the Eritrean Orthodox Church," said USCIRF Chairman Dr. Robert P. George.

Eritrean authorities informed Patriarch Antonios on January 20, 2006 that he would no longer lead the country's largest religious denomination. The government took this action after Patriarch Antonios called for the release of political prisoners and refused to excommunicate 3,000 parishioners who opposed the government. On May 27, 2007, the Eritrean government replaced Patriarch Antonios with Bishop Dioscoros of Mendefera, forcefully removed the Patriarch from his home, and placed him under house arrest at an undisclosed location. Patriarch Antonios continues to be held incommunicado and reportedly is being denied medical care despite suffering from severe diabetes.

"This anniversary should remind us all that the Eritrean people are denied the fundamental, universal human right of religious freedom. The Eritrean government sends those whom they imprison for their religious beliefs to the harshest prisons and subjects them to the cruelest punishments. We must continue to shine the light on these prisoners of conscience until they are free," said Chairman George.

President Isaias Afwerki has ruled Eritrea since 1993. His regime is among the most repressive in the world, with thousands of Eritreans imprisoned for their real or imagined opposition to the government and torture and forced labor are extensive. Between 1,300 and 2,000 people are imprisoned because of their religious beliefs, with the government torturing and beating religious prisoners, confining many in 20-foot metal shipping containers or underground barracks where some have been subjected to extreme temperature fluctuations. Since 2002, the Eritrean government has registered only four religious communities - the (Coptic) Orthodox Church of Eritrea, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea - and maintains tight control over their internal operations and activities. No other religious group has been approved. Without such approval, no group legally can hold public religious activities.

Since 2004, USCIRF has recommended, and the State Department has designated, Eritrea as a "country of particular concern" (CPC), for its "systematic, ongoing and egregious" violations of religious freedom. For more information, please see USCIRF's chapter on [Eritrea](#) in the 2015 Annual Report.
