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At least 150 Christians arrested in Eritrea clampdown

World Watch Monitor (23.08.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2KZKWkw> - At least 150 Eritrean Christians were arrested by government officials during the last two months, with some of them held in an underground prison made up of tunnels.

The most recent arrests occurred 18 August when Eritrean security officials detained 80 Christians from Godayef, an area near the airport of the capital, Asmara. They were taken to a police station and have been held there ever since, a local source told World Watch Monitor.

Four days later, on 22 August, the United Nations observed its first annual commemoration of victims of religiously motivated violence. "On this day, we reaffirm our unwavering support for the victims of violence based on religion and belief. And we demonstrate that support by doing all in our power to prevent such attacks and demanding that those responsible are held accountable," said UN Secretary-General António Guterres.

Eritrea's government current clampdown on Christians began 23 June when Eritrean security officials arrested 70 members of the Faith Mission Church of Christ, in Eritrea's second city, Keren.

The church's members, among them 35 women and 10 children, were taken to Ashuferu prison, 25kms from the city.

The prison is a vast underground tunnel system and the conditions in which the detainees are held are very harsh, the local source said. It's location far from a main road, the source said, "means that anyone who wants to visit loved ones there will have to walk a minimum of 30 minutes to reach the entrance. Inmates are forced to dig additional tunnels when officers need extra space for more prisoners."

After the arrests, the government officials also closed the church-run school, said the local source, whose identity World Watch Monitor is withholding for security reasons.

The Faith Mission Church of Christ was the last church still open in the majority-Muslim city 90kms northwest of Asmara. It was established more than 60 years ago and once had schools and orphanages all over the country, according to religious freedom advocacy group CSW.

It had been waiting for registration since it submitted an application in 2002 when the government introduced a new law that forbids all Churches except for the Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran Churches, as well as Sunni Islam.

On 16 August, six Christians, also from Keren and who were government employees, were taken to a court in Asmara where the judge told them to renounce their faith. The six responded by saying they would "not negotiate their faith" and would "continue following Jesus," the source said. "Reportedly, the judge angrily told them to leave while he considers the next steps. They don't know when to expect his decision."

The government clampdown has sent other Christians in Keren into hiding, the source said.

It follows the government's June seizure of all Catholic-run health clinics in the country, and the arrest of five Orthodox priests. The moves prompted the UN Special Rapporteur for human rights in Eritrea, Daniela Kravetz, to call on the government to uphold religious freedom for its citizens and "release those who have been imprisoned for their religious beliefs."

In May, a monitoring group for the UN said "thousands" of Christians are facing detention as "religious freedom continue[s] to be denied in Eritrea" and questioned why the UN was not monitoring the situation more closely.

Earlier this month, Eritrea's Orthodox patriarch, Abune Antonios, was expelled by pro-government bishops of his church on accusations of heresy. Antonios had been under house arrest since 2007, when he refused to comply with the regime's attempts to interfere with church affairs.

Eritrea is 7th on the Open Doors 2019 World Watch List of the 50 countries in which it is most difficult to live as a Christian.

Church Patriarch 'accused of heresy' and expelled

Abune Antonios, 90 years old, is the latest victim of Eritrea's authoritarian government

By Anne-Bénédicte Hoffner



Former patriarch Antonios III, Abune Antonios. Image captured from video

La Croix International (24.07.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2K68cvO> - Relations between the Eritrean government and Christian churches continue to deteriorate. This time, it is the Orthodox Patriarch himself, 90-year-old Abune Antonios, who has paid the price.

The Orthodox Church's website OCP Media Network reported that he had been "blindly accused of heresy" by "a group of bishops" and even "excluded from its Church."

"This initiative is part of the Eritrean government's ongoing authoritarian propaganda programs," says the Orthodox news agency, which points out that Patriarch Antonios had been "under house arrest since 2007" after being "dismissed by the government while taking a firm stand against its interference in Church affairs."

According to the [BBC](#), the decision was taken by "five of the country's six most powerful bishops," including Bishop Lukas, the Secretary of the Holy Synod. "We don't know why one signature is missing," the British broadcaster remarked.

A most authoritarian regime

Since its independence, won in a fierce struggle against Ethiopia in 1991, Eritrea has been under the control of President Issayas Afewerki, a 68-year-old former engineer known to have imprisoned without trial even his closest friends.

Patriarch Antonios is one of the countless victims of this most authoritarian regime in the world, often compared to North Korea.

Its Church is an autocephalous Eastern Church, which separated from the Church of Ethiopia when Eritrea's independence was proclaimed in 1993.

Antonios, its first patriarch, was consecrated by the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch Shenouda III of Alexandria in 1994, before being deposed in 2005, under pressure from the government. The seat remained vacant for almost two years.

In 2007, the authorities imposed a successor on the Holy Synod, layman Yoftahe Dimetros known as Abune Dioscoros, causing serious difficulties: he was not recognized by some of the faithful, nor by the other Churches.

In 2017, the tenth year of Abune Antonios' imprisonment, diplomatic pressure from France, the European Union, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States combined to secure his release.

To everyone's surprise he appeared in public on Sunday, July 16, 2017 and alongside about 100 faithful, he participated in a Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral in Asmara.

A reassuring statement was read during the Mass and posted on the website of the Orthodox Church of Eritrea. Very briefly, it stated that "after many efforts undertaken by the Union of Monasteries and Scientists of the Orthodox Church of Eritrea, the problem of Patriarch Abune Antonios III has been resolved," and that the united Holy Synod had concluded a "full and complete reconciliation" with him.

Communication operation

In reality, it was only propaganda on the regime's part. The patriarch, who was surrounded by guards throughout the Mass, was again placed under house arrest immediately after this furtive public appearance.

And the pressure on the Orthodox Church has continued.

According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, which closely and regularly monitors the situation in Eritrea, the patriarch, who is seriously diabetic and suffers from high blood pressure, described - in a video taken out of the country clandestinely in April - his living conditions, without care and in the "servants' home" of a villa inhabited by Bishop Lukas. In their letter announcing his expulsion, the five bishops affirmed that "his recent activities" had led them to conclude that "his repentance was not authentic."

"His name should never be mentioned or remembered again and those who do will be severely punished," their letter added.

For the Orthodox website OCP Media Network, all this is a sign of political control over the Church of Eritrea. Its leaders have therefore chosen to maintain their trust in Abune Antonios, who "is still the canonical patriarch of Eritrea, recognized by the Orthodox and the rest of the Christian world."

Catholic Church also under pressure

Evangelical Eritrean Helen Berhane is one of 27 people "who suffered for their faith" and was received July 21 by President Donald Trump as part of his 2nd Conference for Religious Freedom.

Now a refugee in Denmark, the young woman drew attention to "the tragic fate of the patriarch, whom she named, and other church leaders imprisoned without charge," CSW reports.

In his speech, US Vice President Mike Pence called for the release of Abune Antonios, "who has been under house arrest for twelve years now, because he refuses to excommunicate members of his Church who criticize the government."

The country's small Catholic Church has also been in the sights of the authorities since the publication, in 2015, of a courageous pastoral letter entitled "What have you done with your brother?" which warned against the continued emigration of the country's vital people.

In June "people sent by the State - from the army, the police and the health sectors - came forward to demand the surrender of the Catholic Church's health infrastructure," the bishops complained to the Minister of Health.

When the Catholic hospital and clinic officials refused to sign the surrender documents presented, government officials closed the center and evacuated its patients.

Crackdown on Christians in Eritrea spurs UN expert to press Government 'to live up to its international commitments'

UN News (21.06.2019) - <http://bit.ly/2FuHf3a> - Cracking down on Catholic Church activities, arbitrary arrest and imprisonment of Orthodox and other Christian congregation members in Eritrea, prompted a call from a UN independent rights expert on Friday for the Government to respect citizens' freedom of religion and to "release those who have been imprisoned for their religious beliefs".

"These actions show that, despite the improved regional climate for peace and security, the human rights situation in Eritrea remains unchanged", said Daniela Kravetz, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea.

On 12 June, Eritrean authorities ordered the seizure of all Catholic Church-managed health centres.

According to information received, soldiers were posted outside some health facilities, while patients were ordered to go home, and staff threatened.

"The seizure of these health facilities will negatively impact the right to health of the affected populations, in particular those in remote rural areas", Ms. Kravetz explained. "By curtailing the activities of the Catholic Church, the Eritrean authorities are restricting the right of their citizens to enjoy quality health care".

The Catholic Church manages some 40 hospitals and health centres, mainly in rural areas and some inside monasteries. Most provide free services, and many have operated since the 1990s.

The Special Rapporteur said the move followed a call by the Catholic Church for genuine dialogue on peace and reconciliation in Eritrea.

In a pastoral letter issued on 29 April, Eritrea's four Catholic bishops called on the authorities to adopt a comprehensive truth and reconciliation plan to promote dialogue and strengthen peacebuilding. The letter also urged the authorities to implement reforms so that Eritreans would stop fleeing their country.

Ms. Kravetz also received reports that on 13 June, security forces arrested five Orthodox priests from the Debre Bizen monastery, three over 70 years old, for opposing Government interference in Church affairs.

And last month, she received reports that the Eritrean authorities arrested Christians for practicing their faith.

On 17 May, around 30 Pentecostal Christians were reportedly arrested during prayer meetings at different locations in Godeif, south of the capital Asmara. A week earlier, during a private gathering in the Mai Temenai district of Asmara, reportedly some 141 Christians were arrested, including 104 women and 14 children. Some were reportedly taken to Adi Abeito prison, while others were held by the police. About 50 of the detained have since been released while those remaining are being held without charge, according to reports.

Ms. Kravetz stressed that arresting individuals for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of religion and belief is a clear violation of Eritrea's obligations under international human rights law, recalling that freedom of religion is central to the ability of Eritreans to live together peacefully.

The UN envoy will share her findings on the situation during an interactive dialogue scheduled for 2 July at the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

"I urge Eritrea to live up to its international commitments as a member of the Human Rights Council and allow religious institutions to operate freely and all Eritreans to exercise their right to freedom of religion within the country", concluded the Special Rapporteur.

Concern at seizure of Catholic properties and arrests of Orthodox Priests

CSW (19.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/33Z4f1O> - CSW is deeply concerned by the seizure of health facilities belonging to the Catholic Church and the arrests of Orthodox priests in Eritrea, which occurred within a 24 hour period from 12-13 June and which target faith communities that are supposedly permitted to operate in the country.

On 12 June, 21 health facilities owned by the Catholic Church were seized and closed in line with a government directive that was communicated verbally and enforced by police, soldiers and government doctors. The seizures took place just over six weeks after Eritrea's four Catholic bishops [issued a pastoral letter](#) on 29 April calling for "resolute and historical change" in the country through the setting up of a comprehensive truth and reconciliation plan.

[In a letter dated 13 June](#) and addressed to Eritrea's Minister of Health, Amna Nurhusein, the four bishops described the confiscation of the Church's properties as a potential violation of the Church's religious rights. They pointed out that several facilities were situated inside monasteries, and stated that in some instances employees were ordered by security personnel to evict patients who were receiving medical treatment, and to close the buildings, thereby interfering with religious activities. The bishops stressed that the buildings had not been handed over willingly, and that the closures jeopardise the work of the Church, which has been offering medical services since 1995. They also declared themselves open to further dialogue on the matter, as long as it is pursued in a respectful and lawful manner.

On 16 June the Catholic Bishop of Segeneyti , Father Fikremariam Hagos addressed the issue in his sermon, expressing distress at the lack of due process surrounding the seizures and questioning the use of armed officers to enforce the verbal directive.

The next day, on 13 June five Orthodox priests from the Debre-Bizen Monastery in the country's Northern Red Sea Region were arrested. Abba (Father) Kebreab Tekie, Abba Markos Ghebrekidan, Abba Ghebretensae Teweldemedhin, Abba Kidanemaryam Tekeste and Abba Ghebretensai Zemichael were detained, reportedly for supporting the legitimate patriarch of the Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios, and protesting government interference in Church affairs.

Contrary to an initial claim that the priests were detained for purchasing flour on the black market, CSW's sources assert the arrests were linked to events that followed the death of an Orthodox bishop on 17 May. Abune Atnatewos had been the bishop of the Dioceses of Europe, Gash Barka, and Northern and Southern Red Sea region since 2005, and was also a member of the Holy Synod of the Eritrean Orthodox Church (EOC). The bishop wanted to be buried in the Monastery, but his request was refused due to his acquiescence in the removal of the legitimate EOC patriarch, Abune Antonios in 2006, in violation of canon law. Patriarch Antonios, who has [been under house arrest since that time](#), had excommunicated Bishop Atnatewos along with other clergy.

In May 2002, the government effectively outlawed all practices not affiliated with the Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran or Orthodox Christian denominations and Sunni Islam, and began a campaign of arrests targeting unsanctioned denominations that continues to date, and that also affects the officially sanctioned religious communities. In a June 2016 report, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on human rights in Eritrea (COIE) found "reasonable grounds to believe" that crimes against humanity have been committed by state officials in a "widespread and systematic manner" since 1991, including the crime of persecution against religious groups.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said: ***"It is deeply concerning that the seizure of Catholic-owned health care institutions and the arrests of Orthodox priests occurred within a 24 hour period. The targeting of faith communities that are supposed to enjoy government sanction illustrates once again the Eritrean regime's abiding unwillingness to respect and fulfil the right to freedom of religion or belief. It is clear that instead of viewing its seat on the Human Rights Council (HRC) as an opportunity to improve its dire human rights record by engaging with Council mechanisms, the regime continues to violate the rights of its citizens comprehensively. We reiterate our call for Member States to facilitate the renewal of the Special Rapporteur's mandate in order to ensure continued human rights monitoring, to assist in advancing accountability for crimes identified in the Commission of Inquiry's report, and to enable the implementation of time-bound, verifiable benchmarks for human rights improvements."***

Eritrean Catholic bishops say government closes church-run health centers



Women walk along a street Feb. 20, 2016, in Asmara, Eritrea. (Credit: Thomas Mukoya/Reuters via CNS.)

By Francis Njuguna

CRUX (19.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2MCNOpQ> - All health facilities run by the Catholic Church in Eritrea have been seized by the government, the country's bishops said.

Government security officers are said to have removed the staff from the health centers and closed them.

Patients were ordered to go home and soldiers were deployed to guard the centers, the bishops said in a June 13 letter to the ministry of health. The Church runs more than 20 clinics in Eritrea, and many are on the property of monasteries. In their letter, the bishops said the services the Church provides to Eritreans could not be construed as an act of opposing the government. The Church's main concern is the people in need of the services that the government action has halted, it said.

In a May interview with *Catholic News Service* in Nairobi, an Eritrean Catholic nun said the government has some control over the Church in the country and that it is a "closed" church.

"We are subjected to looking over our shoulders to serve the people" of Eritrea, she said, noting that the freedom the Church has in other countries "is not with us."

The sister, who was attending a meeting in the Kenyan capital organized by the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa, known as AMECEA, asked not to be named.

"Our relations with" the Church in other countries, including those in the region, "as well as our pastoral operations are somewhat government controlled," she said.

Before the seizure, government officials were said to have asked administrators at the church-run facilities to sign a document approving the handover. Most are said to have refused.

"The government can say it doesn't want the services of the Church but asking for the property is not right," the bishops' letter said.

In April, Eritrea's bishops called for a truth and reconciliation plan to be set up and said perpetrators need to admit their crimes.

In July 2018, Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed signed a peace pact in the Eritrean capital, Asmara, to bring an end to the two-decade war between the East African countries. An estimated 80,000 people are believed to have been killed between 1998 and 2000 during a fierce border conflict. However, after the two countries signed a U.N.-brokered border agreement in 2000, they failed to implement it.

Because of war and related factors, "the living conditions of our people" have reached critical levels and "massive fleeing abroad continues," the bishops said in their April pastoral letter.

Hundreds of thousands of people have fled Eritrea in recent years, with many making perilous journeys through deserts and across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe.

30 more Christians arrested in Eritrea

'Renounce your faith or go to jail'

By Lindy Lowry

Open Doors USA (04.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2MEXEZb> - More than 30 Christians (members of Pentecostal churches) were arrested by security forces in recent days. This report comes on the heels of [recent news of arrests of 141 Christians, mostly women, in the nation's capital city of Asmara.](#)

According to the most recent report, [police stopped them in three different places, again in Asmara.](#)

“Police officers carry out continuous raids in private homes where devotees of unrecognized religions, especially Pentecostal Christians, meet for community prayer,” the report said. “They are released only if they disavow their faith.”

Intensifying friction in Asmara

The report also refers to intensifying difficulties between the church and Eritrea’s government. Authorities are demanding the “full control” of all religious organizations, such as private schools, medical clinics and orphanages.

“The authorities, in fact, demand the full control of all organizations of religious origin, such as private schools, medical clinics and orphanages” the report indicated—all of which provide needed support to the Eritrean population.

Some 66 percent of all Eritreans live below the poverty line; and there remains an extreme lack of resources and poverty alleviation programs.

Only a couple weeks ago, police rounded up 141 Christians, including 23 men, 104 women and 14 minors from Asmara’s Mai Temenai area. Reportedly, officials separated the men and women before taking the women to Police Station Number 4 and the men to Adi Abeito prison, the main prison for Asmara and the surrounding areas. It’s not known where the 14 minors were held.
