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## ERITREA | Protest letter calls for religious freedom

An estimated 100 people gathered at the Eritrean Embassy in London yesterday for a protest commemorating the tenth anniversary of the mass detentions of Eritrean Christians, which began after the government's closure of every church except those belonging to three denominations. A letter delivered to the embassy called on the Eritrean government to grant religious freedom to Eritrea's citizens and release all prisoners of conscience.

Several members of the Eritrean Diaspora, including young people from the Orthodox Church, joined representatives from seven participating NGOs from the UK and Ireland in the protest. Speeches highlighted the plight of Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios, who has been under house arrest since 2006. The Patriarch was illegally replaced by Bishop Dioscoros, a man approved of by the Eritrean government, but whose appointment is not recognized by the Orthodox papacy. Commenting on these events, Abba Seraphim, Metropolitan of Glastonbury and Head of the British Orthodox Church, said Bishop Dioscoros had "gained prestige and power, but lost his human dignity, while Patriarch Antonios maintains dignity and prestige. The Patriarch stands for justice and is a worthy symbol of what we desire for all Christians in Eritrea."

As the process drew to a close the letter was delivered to the Embassy, signed by Metropolitan Seraphim of Glastonbury on behalf of the seven participating organizations, deploring "the increasing harassment of authorized churches, and the illegal dismissal and indefinite detention of Abune Antonios, the canonically-ordained Orthodox patriarch, and the imprisonment, dismissal and forcible conscription of scores of Orthodox clergymen."

The letter detailed the "inhumane conditions" to which inmates in Eritrea's prisons are subjected. "The testimonies of people who escaped from prisons in Eritrea attest to inmates being incarcerated in inhumane conditions, physically and mentally abused, and deprived of access to adequate food, potable water and medication. We are aware that several have died following mistreatment and/or denial of medical attention, and are particularly concerned at the continuing practice of requiring prisoners to sign statements renouncing their faith as a prerequisite to obtaining their freedom."

The letter also highlighted the plight of thousands of Eritreans who are detained, harassed and driven to exile, solely on account of their faith, and called on the Eritrean government "to facilitate every human right outlined in Eritrea's commendable national constitution, including the right to religious freedom", and "for the unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience in Eritrea."

When Metropolitan Seraphim of Glastonbury, accompanied by the Bishop of Southwark, attempted to deliver the letter, they were advised that they were intruding on diplomatic premises, and had to hand the letter to the police to submit on their behalf.

Commenting on the joint effort by the British Orthodox Church, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Church in Chains- Ireland, the Evangelical Alliance-Wales, Human Rights Concern-Eritrea, Release Eritrea and Release International, the Bishop of Southwark said, "It is my privilege to be here. I am humbled by the witness you are making."

**Notes to Editors:**

1. On May 15, 2002, all churches except those belonging to the Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran denominations were effectively banned and the era of mass arrests of Christians began. Members of independent evangelical and charismatic churches are particularly singled out; however, even permitted churches suffer persecution. Orthodox patriarch Abune Antonios has been under house arrest since 2006 for resisting government interference in church affairs, and priests seen as sympathizing with him are detained and harassed. An estimated 2,000 to 3,000 Christians are currently detained in Eritrea without charge or trial.