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## **ERITREA | Anniversary of Government Crackdown on Churches Marked**

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) joined members of the Eritrean diaspora, the Orthodox Church and six NGOs from the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland on May 30 in a protest vigil outside the Eritrean Embassy in London marking the 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the imposition of severe restrictions on churches in Eritrea.

On May 15, 2002, the Government of Eritrea effectively banned all churches except those belonging to the Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran denominations and initiated a campaign of mass arrests that continues to this day with varying degrees of intensity. Well over 2,000 Christians are currently detained in Eritrea without charge or trial, often in life-threatening conditions, pending denial of their faith.

During the protest, speakers from the participating organizations highlighted the arbitrary detention without trial of tens of thousands of Eritreans of all faiths and none, the plight of the illegally deposed ordained patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, who has been under house arrest since 2006, and the lack of international action to rescue Eritrean refugees who are being tortured for extortion by Bedouin traffickers in Egypt's Sinai Desert.

A letter was delivered to the Embassy toward the end of the protest on behalf of the British Orthodox Church, CSW, Church in Chains-Ireland, Human Rights Concern-Eritrea, Release Eritrea, Release International and the Evangelical Alliance-Wales. In it the agencies expressed dismay at the "continuing detention without trial of tens of thousands of Eritrean citizens, including several thousand Christians," and lamented the fact that "22 years after a heroic struggle for freedom, so many Eritreans are unjustly deprived of their liberty."

The letter concluded with an entreaty for the Government of Eritrea to "ensure the release of all prisoners of conscience regardless of their creed, and to facilitate every human right outlined in Eritrea's commendable constitution, including the right to religious freedom."

CSW's Communications Director, Daniel Sinclair, said: "It was a privilege to take part in yesterday's demonstration for freedom and justice in Eritrea. Sadly, the situation over the last 22 years since independence has worsened, with clear and increasing indications that Eritreans continue to suffer terribly, both in and outside of prison. CSW will continue to stand in solidarity with the Eritrean people until human rights and the rule of law become a reality."