

Submission for Eritrea Hearing, European Parliament
18 July 2008

It is a privilege to speak on behalf of the many Eritreans who have trusted me with their testimonies in the hope that an international community that has for so long neglected their plight will finally be obliged to listen and assist them.

The Eritrean ruling party successfully harnessed all sectors of society to attain freedom, at times using brutality to enforce the tight discipline needed for success against overwhelming odds. However, this requirement for total allegiance has been carried forward into the independence era, and has now become an obsession. Eritrea is now a country where, in the words of one witness and victim of the regime, there are more new prisons than schools and hospitals.

The former Marxist movement has a long-held ideological antipathy towards religion of all kinds. As BBC journalist Jonah Fischer observed, the Eritrean government seems “afraid that people who consider their highest allegiance to be God, at some point may not be patriotic and follow the state's instructions.” This attitude was evident in the 1970s, when the ruling party drew up policy documents vowing, inter alia, to punish anyone deemed to be using religion to sow discord and undermine the progress of the Eritrean people both during and after the armed conflict. Consequently, as a liberation movement it discouraged religious activities in areas under its control and arrested recruits that were involved in any such activity.

The Jehovah Witnesses, who took no part in the 1993 independence referendum and later decided to participate only in non-military aspects of national service, were the first religious group to experience this policy post independence. In October 1994, a directive from President Afewerki effectively ended their civil, political, social and economic rights. They could no longer access government employment, accommodation, schools, hospitals or other government services generally available to Eritrean citizens. Most significantly, they were denied the official identity cards necessary, amongst other things, for registration of births, deaths and marriages, purchasing property, and for gaining passports, internal and external travel permits, and commercial licenses. A year later, the Minister of Internal Affairs confirmed that by “refusing to accept the Government of Eritrea and the laws” Jehovah Witnesses had “lost their right to citizenship”. Those who declined full military service were detained indefinitely, and those caught meeting clandestinely continue to face detention and harassment, including children and geriatrics.

The Muslim community was the next victim of religious repression. Several hundred were detained during the ‘90s suspected of links with the largely-Muslim opposition Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), or of supporting an Islamist/jihad movement, or of opposing the government-installed Sunni Grand Mufti. Many endured torture, others simply “disappeared”, and some are reported to have been executed extra-judicially.

The Government also closed down several Islamic educational institutions and charity organisations, detaining their staff indefinitely.

Arrests have continued intermittently. Most recently, around 40 Muslim scholars were reportedly detained in mid-August of this year. However, perhaps the most prominent detainee was Mr. Taha Mohammed Nur. A lawyer by trade, Taha Mohammed Nur played a significant role in initiating Eritrea's armed struggle. As a member of post-war commissions on the referendum and the national constitution, he was also instrumental in establishing the state of Eritrea, and was later a member of the national endowment association overseeing mosques and their properties. His arrest in November 2005, came shortly after undergoing major heart surgery, and reportedly occurred as he attempted to fly to Italy for further treatment. Taha Mohammed Nur was held incommunicado, reportedly without access to adequate medical attention or food. He died in February 2008, and in an unprecedented move, his family was given his body. However, he was buried without autopsy, so the cause of death remains unknown.

May 2002 saw the harsh enforcement of a 1995 law obliging all religious groups, except Orthodox, Catholic, and Lutheran Christians and followers of Sunni Islam, to officially register and to function under the surveillance of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Severe persecution, particularly of evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity ensued, with over 2000 adherents currently detained without charge or trial, pending the denial of their faith. They are generally held in appalling conditions, some are subjected to torture, and all receive inadequate food, water and medical services. I am aware Mr. Hailegiorgis will be expanding on this, but would like to point out that the forceful, systematic attempt to eliminate non-sanctioned denominations, the severe mistreatment of detainees held in life threatening conditions, the torture and the extra-judicial executions, may possibly amount to a crime against humanity in the international legal sense.

I conclude by briefly outlining the repression experienced by the authorised Christian denominations. Most significantly, from 2005-6 in a series of highly irregular, government-initiated punitive measures, the legitimate patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios, was driven from office in violation of canon law. He was initially deprived of administrative powers by a government-appointed layman, and placed under stringent house arrest. He was then forcibly evicted from his official residence, and was ultimately replaced by a bishop who was neither appointed nor is recognised by the Orthodox Papacy in Egypt. A severe diabetic, his current state of health and whereabouts remain unclear. As this unwarranted interference in ecclesiastical affairs has gone under-reported and almost un-noted, the government has gone on to effectively seize control of the Church's finances, and is now sending its clergy to the military after rescinding their long-standing exemption.

Similar pressure on the Roman Catholic Church in late 2005, precipitated an intervention by Pope Benedict himself, who requested that "the right to exemption from military service be respected," by the Eritrean government. In June 2006, the country's three Catholic bishops allegedly informed the government that the bearing of

arms was “not in accordance” with the role of clergy, and in March 2007, it was reported that the Church had not only refused to supply the government with a comprehensive list of clergy and their whereabouts, but was also resisting a request to either reduce their number or send them to the military. Five months later the government reportedly issued an ultimatum, ordering that control of Catholic-run schools, clinics, orphanages and women’s vocational training centres be handed over to the Ministry of Social Welfare and Labour. Finally in November 2007, 13 foreign Catholic charity workers were effectively expelled in a move that may ultimately further reinforce the government’s hold on aid distribution and, consequentially, on the Eritrean population. A remark by one charity worker highlights the human suffering that will ensue as a result of the expulsions: “without our humanitarian aid the population will be abandoned, the situation itself is already tragic.”

It would appear that in its vigorous quest for total allegiance, the government has come to view religious groupings as rivals. Its harassment of even the authorised groups serves as an indication that in reality, the government seeks to curtail or control every major social activity in the country. The Eritrean government is arguably the most repressive in Africa, and may even be one of the worst in the world. It is time that the international community took note of this for the sake of Eritrea’s suffering population, and our hope is that the change will start today, at least in the case of the European Union (EU).