



5.23.14

ERITREA | Anniversary of Government Crackdown on Churches Marked

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) joined members of the Eritrean diaspora, the British Orthodox Church and four NGOs from the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland May 22 in a protest vigil outside the Eritrean Embassy in London marking the 12th anniversary of the imposition of severe restrictions on churches in Eritrea.

During the protest, Metropolitan Seraphim of Glastonbury spoke of the suffering of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, highlighting the plight of the ordained patriarch, Abune Antonios who was illegally deposed and has been under house arrest since 2006. Commenting on a recently released photograph of Patriarch Antonios that was taken clandestinely Abba Seraphim said that "although the government had stripped away his regalia, his authority and his freedom, they had not been able to take away his inner peace and life of prayer. The photograph showed a monk at peace with himself and his God, having served faithfully and refused to compromise with truth in order to retain his status and worldly honor."

Eritrea is one of the world's most repressive regimes, and speakers from the participating organizations highlighted a number of human rights violations underway in the country, including the arbitrary detention without trial of tens of thousands of Eritreans of all faiths and none, and the plight of vulnerable Eritrean refugees trafficked through Sudan, Libya and Egypt, many of whom are beaten, tortured, raped and have their organs extracted before reaching Europe or Israel.

Commenting on religious freedom violations in Eritrea Elsa Chyrum, Director of Human Rights Concern Eritrea said, "The regime in Eritrea has no limits to its violation of the rights of its own people, including its repression of religious freedom. Choice of religion is a personal affair, and a government should have no say in it. However, in Eritrea, absolute power and the obsessive desire for total control of every aspect of social life have driven the president to close churches, remove a patriarch, detain and torture law-abiding Christians."

Toward the end of the protest a letter was delivered to the Embassy by the leaders of the participating organizations. 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 "23 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."

David Turner, Director of Church in Chains said, "It was a privilege to once again join British and Eritrean friends at the Eritrean Embassy in a united call to the Eritrean government to "Let My People Go" (referring to the continued imprisonment without charge of over 1,000 Christians in Eritrea). It was sad and harrowing to hear speakers tell of the continued suffering of prisoners, families, church leaders and refugees but wonderful to have the freedom to stand together in solidarity in speaking out for freedom and justice. It was also good to have the opportunity of lifting our voices in united prayer to the God of justice who hears the prayers and cries of His people."

Dr. Berhane Asmelash, Director of Release-Eritrea said, "I was glad to see everyone once again standing in solidarity with the people who are suffering for their faith in Eritrea. I believe our voice will be heard, and we shall overcome one day, and we will celebrate in unison with all people who stood their ground firmly, God is on our side and the despicable acts of the Eritrean regime will give way to justice, peace and freedom."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "It is indeed lamentable that after 23 years of independence Eritrea's people are yet to experience true freedom, and still cannot enjoy the extensive rights outlined in their progressive constitution, including the right to freedom of religion or belief. Sadly, with the exception of a privileged few, there are clear indications that life both in and outside of prison continues to worsen. CSW is committed to standing in solidarity with the Eritrean people until human rights and the rule of law become a reality. We hope and pray that by next year the situation will have improved for all Eritreans therefore negating the need for this annual protest."