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ERITREA | Protest Vigil Marks Campaign of Repression Against Christians

Representatives of seven non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from the UK and Ireland joined members of the Eritrean diaspora in a protest vigil outside the Eritrean embassy in London on May 19, to commemorate the 14th anniversary of the imposition of severe restrictions on churches in Eritrea.

In May 2002, the government closed down every church except for those belonging to the Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran denominations. This marked the beginning of an open and ongoing campaign of repression which at its zenith saw an estimated 3,000 Christians imprisoned without charge or trial in life-threatening conditions and pending denial of their faith.

Christian detainees are believed to number in the hundreds and also include members of the three sanctioned churches. The most high-profile is Abune Antonios, the legitimate patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, who in 2007, was put under house arrest and illegally replaced by Bishop Dioscoros, a clergyman approved of by the Eritrean government but unrecognized by the Orthodox papacy.

The protest vigil was moderated by David Turner, Coordinator of Church in Chains, who travels from Ireland annually to attend the event along with a solidarity delegation.

Addressing the plight of the Church and of imprisoned Christians, Father Shenouda of the Eritrean Orthodox Church said, “Fourteen years is too long, but we entrust our brothers and sisters to the Lord.” In a subsequent interview with Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), he spoke of the recent arrests of 13 clergymen, including several senior Bishops, who were resisting pressure to nominate another government-sanctioned Bishop to the patriarchate following the death of Bishop Dioscoros in December 2015. Abune Lukas, a relatively junior bishop, is reported to be the main instigator behind the imprisonment of the clergy. He reportedly toured churches in the diaspora recently to raise support for his own ascendancy, meeting with local clergy and in one instance issuing a thinly-veiled threat when the issue of the

continued imprisonment of Patriarch Antonios was raised.

In a statement read out on her behalf, Elizabeth Chyrum of Human Rights Concern-Eritrea (HRC-E) said Eritrea's "hopes for freedom after independence were dashed" and the nation had become "a living hell where all rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have been violated in every possible way with impunity."

Dr. Berhane Asmelash, Director of Release Eritrea, highlighted the hardship caused by the government's sudden change of currency notes in 2015, when the population was given two weeks to exchange old Nakfa notes for new ones. People are now obliged to queue for lengthy periods to access money. They can only withdraw around 3,000 Nakfa (around \$1850) monthly and must specifically apply for and provide proof of additional expenses, such as weddings.

Dr. Khataza Gondwe, CSW's Team Leader for Africa and Middle East (AME), highlighted the fact that despite being one of the world's smallest nations, Eritrea remains one of its largest refugee-generating countries even though it has not suffered a civil war or humanitarian disaster.

As the protest vigil drew to a close, representatives from Church in Chains, Release Eritrea and CSW attempted to deliver a letter to the embassy, however, embassy staff refused to open the door to receive it.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said: "We will continue to protest and stand in solidarity with the Eritrean people until the dividends of freedom and the rights guaranteed in the constitution, including the right to freedom of religion and belief, are fully realized. The 14 years of ongoing repression that has followed the crackdown on churches is indeed too long; but we will continue to pray in hope that one day change will come and prisoners of conscience of all faiths and none will be set free."