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ERITREA | Doubts Cast on Report of Patriarch's Apology

Doubts have been cast on the veracity of a report circulating via social media that the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church has apologized to the Church Synod and spoken positively of the government's role in efforts to reconcile the church.

His Holiness Abune Antonios has been held incommunicado under house arrest since January 2006, when he was forced out of office in violation of canon law following an illegally convened meeting of the Holy Synod. He had been resisting the government's increasing encroachment in church affairs, had refused to excommunicate 3,000 members of the Orthodox Church's renewal movement and had demanded the release of three prominent Orthodox priests who have been detained incommunicado and without charge since November 2004. In a further contravention of canon law Patriarch Antonios was replaced in 2007 by a government-approved appointee who was never recognized by the Orthodox papacy, and who died Dec. 31, 2015 after a prolonged period of ill-health.

On Aug. 8, the Eritrean Orthodox Church website in Asmara published pictures of Patriarch Antonios in a meeting with a delegation of monks and scholars and government officials. The website also published a letter on headed paper that claimed he had signed a letter apologizing for any intentional or unintended wrongs he may have committed that led to his removal, had expressed regrets regarding the consequences on the church.

Credible sources have informed Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) that the delegation had initially visited the patriarch Aug. 5, ostensibly to apologize for its part in his illegal removal and to begin the process of reconciliation. The Patriarch was subsequently transported to the Patriarchate in Asmara on Aug. 8 for further discussions, and the pictures were taken at that time. The Diaspora Archdiocese of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church (North America, Europe and the Middle East) has also cast doubt on the veracity of the report, highlighting the absence of a written or oral statement from the patriarch himself confirming this version of events. The Diaspora Archdiocese's statement also affirmed that "No statement of 'reconciliation' can be taken at face value where the venue is not free from any duress and without the participation of a neutral third party. Furthermore, the synod, with the full backing of the government, cannot be the accusing party, the judge, and now the agent to declare 'reconciliation.'"

Several contacts drew attention to the fact the Patriarchs' case has assumed an increasingly high profile as Eritrea's severe human rights crisis has come under greater international scrutiny, with some suggesting this report may be a ploy to provide an illusion of progress: "They want to show it's a new era; then they will kill him. There is a big drama of reconciliation, then people die mysteriously. Many Eritreans have been killed like that."

The Patriarch's continued imprisonment is highlighted in the final report of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on human rights in Eritrea (COIE), which found that crimes against humanity have been committed there in a "widespread and systematic manner" since 1991, including the crime of persecution against religious and ethnic groups. A subsequent Human Rights Commission (HRC) resolution adopted on 1 July leaves open the possibility of further action, including by the Security Council, by requesting the submission of the report to all relevant UN bodies "for consideration and appropriate action" in order to ensure accountability for human rights violations, including crimes against humanity.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "While any genuine initiative to reinstate Abune Antonios and reconcile the church would have been warmly welcomed, the information we have received so far suggests this report has been fabricated to deflect criticism of Eritrea's appalling human rights record by providing an illusion of progress. In reality, the continued detention of the legitimate leader of the largest permitted Christian denomination is a clear indication of the government's obsessive determination to monitor, suppress and control every religious community. CSW continues to call for the unconditional release and reinstatement of Abune Antonios. He is a severely diabetic octogenarian and the Eritrean Government must be held accountable for ensuring his safety and access to medication. It is vital that the international community maintains pressure on the regime until every prisoner of conscience is freed without precondition, victims of human rights violations receive redress and those responsible for the grave crimes perpetrated in the country are held to justice."