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ERITREA | Women Die Following Hunger Strike

Two Pentecostal Christians reportedly died in Eritrea on March 17, days after being transferred to a hospital from detention, where they had been on hunger strike.

According to the Eritrean website Erimedrek News, the two women, who were detained in Wi'a military camp, were transported to Massawa Hospital in critical condition March 12. They had embarked on a hunger strike in protest at the abuse they were receiving in detention, and their bodies were allegedly marked with bruising consistent with sexual abuse.

Once at the hospital, the women were reportedly kept in isolation and guarded in shifts by security personnel. Following their deaths, military commanders confiscated their medical cards.

Reports have also emerged of the arrests of a significant number of Christians on Christmas Eve 2016 in the capital city Asmara, after they had been caught praying. They were allegedly transported barefoot to an unknown location.

The Eritrean government is one of the most repressive in the world. Thousands of prisoners of conscience are detained arbitrarily for indefinite periods of time in unsatisfactory facilities where conditions are life threatening and torture is rife. A campaign of arrests targeting selected religious communities has been ongoing since 2002 when the government effectively outlawed all practices not affiliated with the Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran or Orthodox Christian denominations and Sunni Islam.

Members of authorized religious groups can also experience harassment, detention and persecution. Most significantly, and in contravention of canon law, the legitimate patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church (EOC) Abune Antonios was removed from office in January 2006, placed under house arrest and eventually replaced by a government appointee, who died in

December 2015. Patriarch Antonios remains in incommunicado detention in an unknown location, despite reports in August 2016 indicating his release was imminent.

In its June 2016 report, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on human rights in Eritrea found “reasonable grounds to believe” that crimes against humanity have been committed by state officials in a “widespread and systematic manner” since 1991, including the crimes of persecution against religious groups, and rape, repeated rape, and gang rape by detention officials.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, “We mourn with the families and friends of these young women, who are the latest known victims of a regime deemed guilty of perpetrating crimes against humanity against its own people. It is particularly poignant and harrowing to note they may have died after enduring unspeakable violations that compelled them to adopt a hunger strike, the sole means of protest available to them. Their story is emblematic of many others, whose suffering and deaths fail to register internationally due to the closed nature and pervasive control of the regime. It is imperative that this tragedy galvanizes efforts by the international community to ensure justice for victims of crimes against humanity, by formalizing and initiating processes to identify and hold perpetrators accountable before national, regional or international judicial mechanisms.”