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ERITREA | Christians Arrested as Crackdown Continues

A number of Christians were arrested in Eritrea in round-ups of members of unregistered denominations that occurred during the week of May 8.

In one incident, six men and four women were detained following a raid on a prayer meeting in the northeastern town of Ghinda. They are being held at the local police station, where they reportedly lack food. During the same period, an unspecified number of Christians were picked up from their homes in Adi Quala, in the southern part of the country, in raids that are reportedly still ongoing.

The Eritrean government is one of the most repressive in the world. Thousands of prisoners of conscience of all faiths are detained arbitrarily and indefinitely in an extensive network of detention facilities where conditions can be life threatening and torture is a regular occurrence.

Those incarcerated include hundreds of Christians detained in a crackdown that has been ongoing since May 2002, when the government effectively outlawed all religious practices not affiliated with the Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran or Orthodox Christian denominations and Sunni Islam.

However, members of the authorized religious groups also face repression. In a series of machinations that began in 2006, the legitimate patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios, was removed from office and replaced in violation of canon law. He remains incommunicado under house arrest despite reports emanating from Eritrea during August 2016 that indicated his release was imminent. The government is in effective control of the church's resources, and clergy and laypersons deemed loyal to the legitimate patriarch experience harassment, mistreatment and indefinite detention.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) was informed that as part of the ongoing crackdown on unsanctioned faith groups, a committee consisting of members of the local administration, the security services and the Orthodox Church in the capital Asmara is allegedly going from house to house asking occupants about their faith.

While the campaign of arrests is unremitting, pervasive government control means detailed information often emerges slowly. Reports are only just emerging of the arrests in October 2016 of six men and women in Adi Segdo, on the outskirts of Asmara, who were detained as they visited a sick man in his home. The detainees included members of the man's family, and were held for two months.

Another report details the arrests of eight Christians, including a mother and her three-year-old child, after they gathered in a rural area around two miles north of Asmara in August 2016. Another report highlights the arrests of 79 men, women and children, including a mother and baby, who were rounded up during a wedding in May 2016. They were initially incarcerated in Barentu and Agordat. Over 30 members of that group are currently reportedly held in Mai Sirwa detention camp.

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 crime of persecution.

On May 18, CSW will join the British Orthodox Church, Church in Chains (Ireland), Human Rights Concern Eritrea, Release Eritrea, and the Medhanie Alem Eritrean Orthodox Church at a Protest Vigil outside the Eritrean Embassy in London in commemoration of the church closures and to call for the release of all of the country's prisoners of conscience.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "It is sobering to reflect that these arrests form part of an unrelenting campaign of harassment and persecution that has been ongoing since 2002, and which also targets authorized faith groups. As we mark the 15th anniversary of the beginning of this crackdown, the arrests underscore the fact that the situation for freedom of religion or belief in Eritrea has in no way improved. We urge the international community to hold the Eritrean government to account for the crimes it continues to commit against its citizen, and to maintain pressure on the regime until every prisoner of conscience is freed without precondition."