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ERITREA | Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Spends Decade Under House Arrest

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) remains gravely concerned about the wellbeing of His Holiness Abune Antonios, the legitimate Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox (Tewahdo) Church, who recently marked his 10th year of incommunicado house arrest in an unknown location. There are reports of a severe deterioration in his health, possibly as a result of poisoning.

In January 2006, the 89-year-old patriarch was removed from office, in violation of canon law, after objecting to undue government interference in church affairs. He had refused requests for the closure the Medhanie Alem Church, which was linked with the Orthodox renewal movement, and the excommunication of 3,000 of its members. Patriarch Antonios had also objected to the detention in November 2004 of three Orthodox priests from the Medhanie Alem Church, and to unwarranted intrusion in the administration of the Patriarchate by Yoftahe Dimetros, a government-appointed layperson who assumed a position within the Holy Synod in another contravention of canon law.

Reports of the patriarch's removal were initially denied by the government. However, on Jan. 20, 2007, two priests accompanied by three security agents arrived at his official residence and confiscated the patriarch's personal pontifical insignia. Then on May 27, 2007, the patriarch was forcibly evicted from his official residence by members of the Eritrean security forces at around 5 a.m. local time, and transported to an unknown destination.

Recent reports from sources close to CSW and repeated in an article on the Eritrean website Assenna.com allege that the patriarch was transported to a healthcare facility in Edaga Hamus area of Asmara on or around May 7 on the pretext of receiving a medical examination, which he said he did not require. Once there, Abune Antonios was allegedly injected with a substance that caused him to fall gravely ill, with symptoms that reportedly include severe pain in the spine and diarrhea. His deterioration was reportedly so severe that the Eritrean Orthodox Church Diocese of North America, Europe and Middle East issued a call to prayer. The patriarch, who suffers from severe diabetes and high blood pressure, will turn 90 on July 12.

In December 2015, the Bishop of Mendefera, Abune Dioscoros, who replaced the patriarch in violation of the church's constitution, died following a lengthy and debilitating illness. Subsequently, on Aug. 8, 2016, the Eritrean Orthodox Church website in Asmara published

pictures of a meeting between Patriarch Antonios and a delegation of monks, scholars and government officials. The website also published a letter on headed paper it claimed the patriarch had signed, in which he apologized for any intentional or unintended wrongs he may have committed that led to his removal and indicated he was soon to be released. However, this version of events was debunked by several credible sources.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "Tomorrow (May 27) marks 10 years of the unjust incarceration of an innocent man who is already in frail health. The government has stripped him systematically of his liberty and of every possession related to his position. However, it failed strip him of his dignity and lacks the capacity to take away his calling. Patriarch Antonios remains the legitimate patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and has not been forgotten. CSW continues to call for his immediate and unconditional release and reinstatement. We also to urge the international community not only to express concern at the patriarch's plight, but to also remind the Eritrean authorities that his removal constituted an unlawful interference in church affairs, and to request his immediate release and return to office."