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ERITREA | Christian Women Held in Island Prison

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned that 33 Eritrean women are being held in an infamous island prison in the Red Sea. They were detained in a series of raids on members of non-sanctioned churches by the Eritrean military, which began in May and have continued into June.

According to CSW's sources, at least 170 Christians have been detained so far in the raids in the capital Asmara and seven other towns. The 33 women were among the first to be arrested and are being held in Nakura, a notoriously harsh prison island in the Dahlak Archipelago that was created by Italian colonialists in the late 19th Century to crush political dissent. Most are reported to be young mothers whose husbands are either military conscripts or are eking out an existence elsewhere. Consequently, their arrests have left 50 children without parental care.

The raids are the latest phase in a crackdown on Christians that has been ongoing since May 2002, when the Eritrean government effectively outlawed religious practices not affiliated with the Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran and Orthodox Christian denominations or Sunni Islam.

In the past, detained Christians were incarcerated in remote desert camps for the most part, with some reported deaths.

This latest phase has been described to CSW as “unprecedented in its intensity and rough treatment. Christians across the country have taken to their knees in expectation of God’s faithfulness and grace in these difficult times and call on others who read of their plight to join them in prayers.”

In its June 2016 report, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on human rights in Eritrea (COIE) 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 June 23, the Human Rights Council (HRC) passed a resolution extending the mandate of the special rapporteur on Eritrea for one year and “noting with grave concern the continued use by the government of Eritrea of arbitrary arrest and detention, including incommunicado detention in extremely harsh and life-threatening conditions, of persons suspected of evasion of national service, attempting to flee the country or unable to produce identity documents, exercising the right to freedom of religion, or freedom of opinion and expression.”

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "This spike in arrests provides a clear illustration that the persecution of unrecognized faith groups in Eritrea is continuing. Moreover, the detention of these women, many of whom are young mothers, in a notoriously harsh facility simply on account of their religion or belief, is unwarranted, deplorable and in violation of Eritrea's obligations under international law. Obviously, there has been no improvement in Eritrea's human rights situation, and CSW warmly welcomes the renewal of the special rapporteur's mandate, which will ensure continued human rights monitoring and follow up of Eritrea's implementation of recommendations from the special rapporteur's reports and those of the COIE. It is time to prioritise accountability for human rights violations; thus we reiterate our call for the international community to facilitate justice for victims of atrocity crimes, and to maintain pressure on the Eritrean regime until every prisoner of conscience is freed without precondition."