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## ERITREA | Patriarch Participates in Sunday Mass

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) confirmed that the legitimate patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Abune Antonius, who has been under house arrest since 2007, participated in a Mass held at St Mary's Cathedral in Asmara on July 16.

The Mass was attended by hundreds of worshippers and was the patriarch's first public appearance in over a decade. Sources close to CSW have described it as "a profound answer to many prayers and much pressure." However, while delighted, CSW's sources sounded a note of caution regarding the need to clarify whether the patriarch had been released temporarily or conditionally.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "It is encouraging to hear that Patriarch Antonios was able to participate in a Mass after a decade of incommunicado incarceration. We await clarification regarding the terms of his release, and our profound hope is that the patriarch is finally free and will be reinstated unconditionally. We also remember the tens of thousands of prisoners of conscience of all faiths and none still languishing in indefinite detention in Eritrea, including the four Orthodox priests and eight Protestant leaders, and reiterate our call for their immediate and unconditional release."

This is not the first time there have been reports of the patriarch's imminent release from house arrest. 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 that it claimed the patriarch had signed, in which he purportedly apologized for any intentional or unintended wrongs he may have committed that led to his removal. The website indicated he was soon to be released; however, its version of events was debunked by several credible sources.

Patriarch Antonios, who turned 90 on July 12, has been under house arrest since 2007, after being illegally removed from office. His reappearance in public follows mounting international pressure, including from the United Nations Human Rights Council, the UN Special Rapporteur on Eritrea, the French government, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom and the European Parliament. It also follows increasing rumors of his imminent release and reinstatement.

Patriarch Antonios had criticized the Eritrean government's increasing interference in church affairs since his ordination in 2004. In January 2005, the traditional Orthodox Annual Christmas message was not aired on national media, following the patriarch's objection to the detention in November 2004 of three Orthodox priests from the Medhanie Alem Church, whom he had earlier refused to remove from their positions. He had also rejected government requests for the closure of that church, which was linked to the Orthodox renewal movement, and for its 3000 members to be excommunicated. Soon afterwards, the patriarch's close advisor Marigetta Yetbareke was forced to resign and was eventually detained indefinitely.

In August 2005, Patriarch Antonios was removed from effective control of the Patriarchate and confined to ceremonial duties for objecting to the appointment of Yoftahe Dimetros, a government-affiliated lay person, as administrator of the Church's governing body, the Holy Synod, in contravention to canon law. The patriarch was formally notified of his dismissal from office in a letter dated Jan. 13, 2006, following a secret and illegally-convened Holy Synod meeting. During a second such meeting on Jan. 20, an alternative patriarch was chosen and Dimetros was also alleged to have ordered the confiscation of the patriarch's car and the dismissal of his chauffeur.

On Jan. 20, 2007, the patriarch's personal pontifical insignia were confiscated, and in the early hours of May 27, 2007, he was removed from his residence and detained incommunicado in an unknown location.

In December 2015, the bishop who had replaced the patriarch in violation of the church's constitution, died following a lengthy and debilitating illness.