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Eritrea

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ERITREA: CSW AND HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERN ERITREA CALL FOR RELEASE OF ARBITRARILY DETAINED CLERGYMEN

CSW and Human Rights Concern Eritrea (HRCE) are calling for the release of four clergymen detained arbitrarily by the Eritrean authorities in separate incidents, despite belonging to Christian denominations that are permitted to operate in the country.

On 15 October Abune Fikremariam Hagos, the first Bishop of the Catholic Eparchy of Segheneity, was arrested at Asmara International Airport as he returned from a visit to Europe, and taken to an unknown location

On 12 October, three days prior to the Bishop's arrest, the government detained Abba Abraham Habtom Gebremariam, the deputy parish priest in charge of students at the Capuchin Society in Teseney town. He was initially held at the 2nd Police Station in the capital, Asmara, before being transferred the next day to Adi Abeito prison, north of Asmara.

On 11 October, Eritrean security agents detained Father Mihretab Stefanos, the parish priest of St Michael's Church in Segheneity. His current whereabouts are unconfirmed, although there is speculation that both he and Bishop Fikremariam are also being held in Adi Abeito prison.

The Eritrean government is yet to give a reason for arresting the clergymen. However, along with Eritrea's three other Catholic Bishops, Abune Hagos has often expressed concern for the wellbeing of the Eritrean people.

In a 2014 Pastoral Letter the four Catholic Bishops had addressed the refugee exodus generated by Eritrea's human rights crisis, stating: "The true enemy of peace is injustice. Respect for persons, their dignity and their rights, is the corner-stone of peace."

Following Eritrea's rapprochement with Ethiopia in 2018, in another [Pastoral Letter](#) dated 29 April 2019 the Bishops had called for, among other things, "resolute and historical change" through the setting up of a comprehensive truth and reconciliation plan. Additionally, Bishop Hagos spoke out from the pulpit about the seizure and closure on 12 June 2019 of 22 Catholic health facilities in line with a government directive that was communicated verbally and enforced by police, soldiers and government doctors. More recently, he and his fellow bishops reportedly discouraged congregants from purchasing goods that had been looted from Ethiopia's Tigray region.

Elizabeth Chyrum, Director of HRCE said "The arbitrary arrests of the Catholic clergy are occurring against the backdrop of massive and punitive door to door round ups of Eritrean citizens of all ages, who are being sent to fight in Tigray, in a military offensive that appears predicated on wearing down the stamina and ammunition of the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF) by sending Eritrean men and woman, who are viewed as expendable by their government, to die at the frontlines in waves."

CSW and HRCE have also learned of the detention in 2021 of Father Kiros Tsegay, an American citizen and founder of the Debre Abune Aregawi-Orlando Orthodox Church in Florida, USA, where he had served diligently for over 25 years.

Father Tsegay's mother died in November 2020, and he had travelled to Eritrea in October 2021 to organise a memorial service marking the first anniversary of her death, which was scheduled to take place in November 2021. However, he was arrested by Eritrean security agents on or around 5 October 2021, and is currently held in an unknown location.

In May 2002 Eritrea closed all churches not affiliated with the Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran or Orthodox Christian traditions, and began a campaign of arrests of adherents of non-sanctioned churches that continues to this day. However, the permitted religious denominations also experience repression. In what is perhaps the most egregious example, Abune Antonios, the legitimate patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, who was illegally removed from office in a series of machinations for resisting government interference in church affairs, died in the early hours of 9 February, 15 years after being put under house arrest.

Dr Khataza Gondwe, CSW's Joint Head of Advocacy and Team Leader for Africa and the Middle East at CSW said: "The arbitrary detention of clergy from denominations which are ostensibly permitted to function illustrates that in reality, the right to freedom of religion or belief is being restricted comprehensively in Eritrea, along with every other human right. We call on the Eritrean regime to release the four clergymen, along with every other prisoner of conscience it has detained arbitrarily. We also call for the immediate withdrawal of Eritrean troops from Tigray and other parts of Ethiopia, and for the regime to focus instead on respecting and protecting the rights of Eritrean citizens, and ensuring they finally enjoy the dividends of independence, for which so much was sacrificed by so many."

For further information or to arrange interviews please contact Ellis Heasley, Public Affairs Officer at CSW on +44 (0)7825 266 803 or email ellisheasley@csw.org.uk.

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