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**Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

Written statement* submitted by Jubilee Campaign, a non- governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[03 February 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



The Status of Religious Freedom in Eritrea

Overview

Jubilee Campaign seeks to call attention to the exponentially worsening human rights situation and religious freedom situation in Eritrea which continues despite some notable steps forward in recent years. Additionally, we would like to offer some recommendations of action. Issues of particular concern in terms of human rights and religious freedom in Eritrea include restrictions on religious practice, arbitrary and prolonged detention of prisoners of conscience, forced closure of Catholic institutions, indefinite military service, and the dangers of refolement to Eritrea.

Freedom of Religion or belief and arbitrary detention

In its national report submitted to the Human Rights Council Working Group of the Universal Periodic Review Third Cycle in November 2018, the government makes the claim that freedom of religion is “protected by law and is sustained as a culture respected by every citizen. The Transitional Codes protect the rights of individuals to be free from any discrimination and persecution on account of their religion. No citizen is imprisoned on account of beliefs, including religious beliefs.”¹

The government of Eritrea only recognizes four religions as legitimate: Eritrean Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, Sunni Islam, and Eritrean Evangelical Christianity. Any other religious cohort is restricted from registering with the state and practicing their faith despite substantial membership among the population, including the Baha’i faith, the Presbyterian Church, and the Methodist Church.² Even individuals from the four main religions face regulation and monitoring by the government. In fact, any religious practice that is deemed “unauthorized” is criminalized, and such religious “dissidents” are often detained.³

In the same report, the government states that “legal right to unrestricted religious belief and practice in detention centres is implemented in accordance to Article 2 (2-9) of the ECRS [Eritrean Correctional and Rehabilitation Services]. They continue to pray, fast and observe other practices in their respective religions and beliefs.”⁴ This claim is refuted with evidence that harsh restrictions on and prohibitions of prayer, worship, preaching, and ownership and use of religious text and materials exist within prisons, and that many individuals are forced to renounce their faith in the threat of severe punishment.⁵

The Eritrean government claims that “a fundamental principle in the transitional codes and proclamations is respect and protection of citizens’ right to lawful expression and opinion without interference. This demands collective responsibility to the nation and hence protection of national security, national values, public order and respect to others.”⁶ Freedom of expression and freedom of religion are inextricably tied in Eritrea. A myriad of religious affiliates, members, and leaders have been arrested for a combination of their religious beliefs and their condemnation of government interference with religious affairs.⁷ For example, Patriarch Abune Antonios, leader of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, was detained and placed under house arrest in 2006 for his refusal to comply with government instructions to excommunicate over one thousand members of the Church and his public criticisms of the

¹ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/337/31/PDF/G1833731.pdf?OpenElement>

² https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_ERITREA_2019.pdf

³ <http://eritreanrefugees.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ERITREAN-ASYLUM-CLAIMS-SUMMARY.pdf>

⁴ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/337/31/PDF/G1833731.pdf?OpenElement>

⁵ https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_ERITREA_2019.pdf ; <http://eritreanrefugees.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ERITREAN-ASYLUM-CLAIMS-SUMMARY.pdf>

⁶ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/337/31/PDF/G1833731.pdf?OpenElement>

⁷ https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_ERITREA_2019.pdf

arrests of numerous priests.⁸ Just one year later, Patriarch Abune Antonios was transferred to a secret location where he continued to serve his unlawful sentence. His last public appearance was at mass in July 2017, and he has since been transferred to a new location. 92-year-old Patriarch Antonios suffers from diabetes and is reportedly not being administered medicine for his condition.

Lastly, the government claims that “religious institutions conduct elections for their respective hierarchies- the Synod, Dar-al-Iftae, and other decision making organs without any intervention from any side.”⁹ This statement is blatantly false, as- shortly after Patriarch Antonios was deposed by the Synod due to increasing compulsion by the government-Eritrean officials designated Bishop Dioscoros of Mendefera as the new state-approved Patriarch with likely-coerced consent of members of the Eritrean Orthodox Church.¹⁰ Many existing members of the Eritrean Orthodox Church still consider Patriarch Antonios to be the legitimate leader of the Church despite the continuance of his 14-year detention.

Forced closure of Catholic Institutions

In June 2019, the Eritrean government started a new campaign to close all Catholic health institutions and hospitals. Such closures disproportionately affect those in poverty and in rural areas, as many of these clinics provided cheaper and more accessible health care in locations lacking affordable health provisions by the government- if any at all in more rural areas.¹¹ The government explanation for its massive crack down is that there exists no need for such clinics, as they are already provided by the government, and that these hospitals and health institutions were illegally evangelizing.¹²

Following this campaign, in September, it was reported that the government has forcibly closed seven Catholic schools with the argument that “religious groups do not have the right to ‘actually conduct developmental activities in areas of their choice as this is fraught with discrimination’ and they are not ‘allowed, to solicit funds from external donors.’”¹³

Indefinite military conscription

One of the most egregious human rights violations that often- in accordance with increasing religious persecution- drives Eritrean citizens to flee and seek asylum in nearby and far-away nations is prolonged conscripted military service. Since 1995, all high school “finalists” are required to complete mandatory military service for a length of a mere 18 months; however, in light of the emerging Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict of the late nineties and early twenty-first century, the term lengths of military service was prolonged indeterminately.¹⁴ According to Amnesty International, “students have come to view the education system as a trap that delivers them right into the jaws of national service. Some drop out of school to escape conscription.”¹⁵

Those that have served such unlawfully lengthy terms of service in Eritrea but have escaped describe the situation. In addition to unsanitary living conditions, endless hours of forced

⁸ <https://www.churchinchains.ie/prisoner-profiles/patriarch-antonios/> ; <https://www.uscirf.gov/patriarch-abune-antonios>

⁹ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/337/31/PDF/G1833731.pdf?OpenElement>

¹⁰ <https://www.uscirf.gov/patriarch-abune-antonios> ; <https://www.churchinchains.ie/prisoner-profiles/patriarch-antonios/>

¹¹ <https://www.persecution.org/2019/06/21/eritrea-closes-catholic-run-health-facilities/>

¹² <https://www.persecution.org/2019/09/10/eritrea-closes-religious-schools-following-june-closures-catholic-health-facilities/>

¹³ <https://www.persecution.org/2019/09/10/eritrea-closes-religious-schools-following-june-closures-catholic-health-facilities/>

¹⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/07/op-ed-eritrea-no-more-excuses-for-indefinite-national-service/>

¹⁵ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/07/op-ed-eritrea-no-more-excuses-for-indefinite-national-service/>

labor, and torture, conscripts are paid so little that they are unable to afford food or health care.¹⁶

The dangers of refoulement

Due to the poor human rights and religious freedom conditions in Eritrea, many young Eritreans have fled to nearby nations including Ethiopia and Sudan and farther nations including Germany and the United States of America. Unfortunately, many nations have remained unwelcoming of these innocent refugees, forcibly returning them to their home country, where they face increased punishments for their perceived betrayal.¹⁷

According to Human Rights Concern Eritrea, “anyone who has escaped from Eritrea without government permission to leave is regarded as a traitor who has committed a crime according to the legal system in operation under the present regime in Eritrea,” and such act of betrayal places them in danger of arrest, detention, physical torture, and more in military prisons such as Adi-abieto.¹⁸

Examples of torture faced by repatriated Eritreans include “long periods of time in controlled positions,” “pistols pointed at detainees during interrogations, exposure to insects,” “beatings with sticks, whipping with electric wires, being forced to ‘walk on sharp objects barefoot,’ or to ‘roll on the ground over sharp stones.’”¹⁹ The UN Special Rapporteur further clarified in her 2013 and 2014 reports that returned Eritreans who are arrested and placed in detention face unsanitary conditions, lack of sufficient food and water, exposure to extreme heat and many insects in underground prison cells.²⁰

Recommendations to the Government of Eritrea

Jubilee Campaign calls upon Eritrea to:

- Allow the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief entry into Eritrea for reporting.
- Release unconditionally all religious prisoners of conscience, including Patriarch Abune Antonios.
- Allow for the registration of minority religions.
- Cease the practice of arbitrary detention of individuals for their religious or political beliefs in accordance with Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 9 which states “no one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile.”
- Eliminate the practice of indefinite military conscription or hereby limit the term to reasonable lengths of time.
- Stop forcibly closing Catholic health and educational institutions.
- Eliminate the practice of torture in detention centers, and provide sufficient food and water, as well as improve sanitation of living conditions.

¹⁶ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/07/op-ed-eritrea-no-more-excuses-for-indefinite-national-service/>

¹⁷ <https://helprefugees.org/news/why-are-so-many-people-fleeing-eritrea/>

¹⁸ https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles_papers_reports/987 ; <http://eritreanrefugees.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Asylum-Seekers-Should-Not-Be-Returned-HRC-E-5-2-2019.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2014/10/01/ERI104941.E%20.pdf>

²⁰ <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2014/10/01/ERI104941.E%20.pdf>

Recommendations to the Human Rights Council

Jubilee Campaign calls upon the Human Rights Council to:

- Take measures to encourage or require Eritrea to meet its reporting obligations as well as human rights and religious freedom obligations as a member state of the Human Rights Council.
 - Condemn the actions of the government of Eritrea that violate international humanitarian norms and the norm of international freed.
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