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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.

[28 May 2021]

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



Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on Eritrea – The Humanitarian Crisis in Tigray, the Arrest of Eritrean Christians, and the Prolonged Detention of Patriarch Abune Antonios

Jubilee Campaign would like to raise to the Council's attention the extremely precarious human rights and religious freedom situation in the State of Eritrea, in particular: the devastating atrocities taking place in Tigray; the pattern of arbitrary detention and release of Eritrean Christians; and the prolonged detention of Patriarch Abune Antonios.

The Escalating Humanitarian Crisis in Tigray

In November 2020, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed authorized a military offensive into the Tigray against the regional ruling Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF); he had iterated on multiple occasions his goal to unify the whole of Ethiopia by simultaneously bolstering government authority and diminishing regional authority.¹ Following the start of the military offensive which was violent from the outset, Eritrean forces have involved themselves in the conflict and are participating in mass human rights atrocities.

As of March 2021, the casualties amount to thousands, while it is estimated that upwards of 1.7 million Tigrayan civilians have been internally displaced.² Despite multiple early claims by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy that Eritrean troops have not taken part in the conflict,³ interviews with witnesses and refugees reveal that Eritrean forces have committed numerous human rights violations, including: extrajudicial killings of civilians as young as 13 years old, sexual violence and gang rape of women and girls, indiscriminate gun violence, looting of aid supplies, forced repatriation of Eritrean refugees, and more.⁴

The most horrific incident of Eritrean soldiers' involvement occurred within just 24 hours between November 28 and 29 2020. Eritrean troops seized the Tigrayan town of Axum, where they went door-to-door conducting searches of homes and shooting civilians. 41 community members that survived the attack reported looking outside of their homes and seeing bodies littering the street and grieving family members. The majority of those killed in this incident were men and young boys, wielding no weapons, who were shot as they attempted to flee the danger. Following the initial bloodshed on the 28th, on 29 November, individuals returning to collect bodies for proper burial were similarly attacked by Eritrean troops. The total estimated casualties from this single event amount to 200 individuals.⁵

The situation has reached such a point of devastation that multiple nations and entities have publicly called for a withdrawal of Eritrean troops from the Tigray region. The G7 Foreign Ministers of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America released a joint statement urging that Ethiopia allow humanitarian access and Eritrean troops to exit the region immediately.⁶ The United Nations characterized the atrocities committed by the Eritrean Defense Forces

¹ Declan Walsh & Abdi Latif Dahir, "Why is Ethiopia at War With Itself?", The New York Times, 7 April 2021.

² DW News, "Tigray crisis worsening with no withdrawal of Eritrean troops in sight: UN", 16 April 2021.

³ Supra note 1.

⁴ Declan Walsh & Simon Marks, "Refugees Come Under Fire as Old Foes Fight in Concert in Ethiopia", The New York Times, 28 December 2020. ; Human Rights Watch, "Ethiopia: Eritrean Forces Massacre Tigray Civilians", 5 March 2021.

⁵ Amnesty International, The Massacre in Axum, 26 February 2021.

⁶ European External Action Service, "Ethiopia: G7 Foreign Ministers' Statement on the situation in Tigray", 2 April 2021.

as a “campaign of destruction” and highlighted a recent incident in which Eritrean forces ambushed a church and killed multiple Christian worshippers.⁷

The Pattern of Arbitrary Arrest and Subsequent Release of Eritrean Christians

Routinely throughout 2019 and 2020, Eritrean authorities have maintained a concerning and confusing pattern by which they both arrest groups of Christian believers and also release groups of Christian prisoners. In a nation where the government maintains a strict hold on religion, arbitrary arrest is not an unprecedented trend; however, it has only exacerbated within the past few years, especially since June 2019, when the government closed all Catholic-run health clinics.⁸

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen numerous instances in which dozens of Eritrean Christian prisoners have been released from prison, sometimes to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in overcrowded detention centers;⁹ experts have suggested that recent releases of Christian prisoners of conscience are part of a plan by the government to distract the world from Eritrea’s involvement in the Tigray humanitarian crisis. No matter the reason, such a practice of arbitrary detention of religious minorities is unacceptable.

Every time hopes are raised in response to a mass release, however, they are quickly crushed when dozens more Christians are arrested. On 4 March 2021, Eritrea released 21 Christian prisoners of conscience – all of them young mothers – renewing the total to 171 Eritrean Christians that have been released from their unjust detention within seven months.¹⁰ Then, just over a month later in April 2021, another 35 Christians were arrested in a single day – 23 were holding a prayer gathering in Asmara, while the other 12 were holding a prayer meeting in Assab.¹¹ These individuals had committed no crime other than worshiping according to their beliefs. Release International recently estimated that 129 Eritrean Christian prisoners of conscience remain detained state jails, and that about 150 army conscripts have been detained for openly practicing their religious beliefs.¹²

It is important to note that Eritrean Christians are not the only religious community that has been targeted for imprisonment. In December 2020, 28 Jehovah’s Witnesses – including 26 men and 2 women – were released from prison after serving between 5 and 26 years in prison.¹³ Similarly to the situation with releases of Christian prisoners, it is believed that this action was taken to limit the spread of COVID-19; while we were grateful to hear of the release, there remains 20 Jehovah’s Witnesses wrongfully imprisoned in Eritrea for their faith.

The Prolonged Detention of Patriarch Abune Antonios

In 2006, the Eritrean government forcibly deposed Abune Antonios from his position as Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Tawahedo Church, and by late May 2007, he would be arbitrarily detained. Patriarch Antonios was targeted by authorities for his previous criticisms of the government’s excessive intrusion in church affairs.¹⁴ Other groups have explained that they believe Patriarch Antonios’ deposition and arrest in 2006-2007 was part of a larger plan for the Eritrean government to gain more control over the Eritrean

⁷ Michelle Nichols, “U.N., U.S. demand Eritrean troops leave Ethiopia’s Tigray region”, Reuters, 5 March 2021.

⁸ International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF), “At least 150 Christians arrested in Eritrea clampdown”, 3 December 2019.

⁹ Julia Bicknell, “Eritrea Frees Evangelical Prisoners Due to COVID-19”, Christianity Today, 28 September 2020.

¹⁰ International Christian Concern, “21 Christians Released From Prison in Eritrea”, 4 March 2021.

¹¹ Keep the Faith, “Freedom hopes dashed in Eritrea as more Christians arrested”, 21 April 2021.

¹² Release International, “36 More Christians Released in Eritrea”, 13 April 2021.

¹³ JW.org, “Imprisoned for Their Faith”.

¹⁴ Church in Chains, Patriarch Antonios, updated 6 October 2020.

Orthodox Church – exactly what Patriarch Antonios so justly and vehemently opposed.¹⁵ Since his detention, Patriarch Antonios has been transferred to numerous detention locations, but his whereabouts remain unknown.

In April 2019, Patriarch Antonios secretly filmed a video in which he rejected the appointment of nonordained layman Yoftahe Dimetros as leader of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. In response to this video, five pro-Eritrean-government bishops signed a statement accusing Patriarch Antonios of heresy and expelling him from the Church. While the statement iterated that Patriarch Antonios will continue to be provided food and shelter by the Church, “his name should never be mentioned and remembered and those that do will be punished severely.”¹⁶

It is of increasing concern that despite numerous factors – his old age of 93 years, the COVID-19 pandemic, and his struggle with severe diabetes, he has reportedly been denied medical care.¹⁷ Information about Patriarch Antonios’ condition remains few and far between, but in October 2020 a photograph was circulated in which he is sitting outside in the sun during his “allowed time” and looking healthy despite his age and health conditions.¹⁸ While we are relieved to see that he seems to be stable, we find it reprehensible that Patriarch Antonios has been unjustly detained incommunicado for fourteen years despite his revered character and work.

Recommendations

Jubilee Campaign urges members and observer states of the Human Rights Council to call upon the State of Eritrea to:

1. Promptly withdraw their troops from the Tigray region of Ethiopia and ensure that all troops responsible for committing human rights violations and crimes against humanity against civilians and refugees are prosecuted.
2. Cease the practice of ambushing houses of worship, arbitrarily detaining people of faith, and imprisoning them for indefinite periods of time.
3. Release immediately and unconditionally all religious prisoners of conscience, including Patriarch Abune Antonios.

¹⁵ BBC News, “Eritrea Orthodox Church ex-leader expelled for ‘heresy’”, 19 July 2019.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), Patriarch Abune Antonios.

¹⁸ Supra note 13.