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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

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.

[11 February 2019]

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

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Freedom of Religion and Belief Concerns in Eritrea

Jubilee Campaign seeks to draw the Councils attention to the domestic human rights and religious freedom situation in Eritrea.

We congratulate the State of Eritrea and Ethiopia on their peace agreement. Regrettably, very little has been done to improve the rights domestically of Eritrean citizens, particularly as it relates to the exercise of the right of the freedom of religion and belief. In light of Eritrea's new position in the Human Rights Council we urge Eritrea to live up to the Human Rights standards that the Council was stipulated to uphold.

We are cognizant of the confirmed release of 35 individuals in July 2018 who were arrested without trial by the government for belonging to unregistered Christian denominations. This action does not distract however, from the thousands who remain in prisoners solely for their choice of belief. We hope this action compels Eritrea to release the remaining thousands of prisoners of conscience to enjoy their freedom and rights.

Since our written statement to the Human Rights Council in 2016 the Eritrean government has still lacked cooperation in allowing the Special Rapporteur access to Eritrea. We agree with the Special Rapporteur's report from 2018 that the refusal of the Eritrean authorities to address human rights issues and their selective engagement with the international community on these issues are "symptomatic of a broader context of denial and rejection, suggesting that the situation of human rights in the country remains critical." Moreover, we attest to the crises of the situation.

The crackdown on religious freedom has extended and continues to extend to the four registered religious groups and to those who are unable to worship or practice their belief because there is no registration permitted of their religious denomination.

Freedom of Religion and Belief

Beginning in 1995 when the Eritrean government introduced the Proclamation No. 73/1995 to Standardize and Articulate Religious institutions and activities it gave the State extensive powers to monitor church activity and not merely a pro forma registration of organizations.

In 2002 a new law was enforced that only recognized three branches of religious entities: Orthodox, Catholic, the Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and Sunni Islam. It thus forced those who were worshipping outside these categories to be considered illegal, and many were arrested for engaging in illegal worship or faith practice. Following the law in 2002 over 1,800 Christians were detained. Religious adherence, association, and practice beyond those denominations is prohibited and punishable by law. In light of the lifting of the arms embargo on Eritrea it is a call for Eritrea to take their responsibility to reveal a country that is fond of its citizens and fond of diversity.

Discrimination and Persecution of Christians and other religious minorities

Arbitrary detention is widely practiced by Eritrea and violates Article 9, 10, and 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The United States of America Department of State in its annual Report on religious rights estimates that between 1,200 and 3,000 individuals are currently being held by the government in Eritrea on religious grounds. Among them are several Evangelical and Pentecostal pastors who have been detained for more than 10 years. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has reported on the torture suffered by the prisoners of conscience in Eritrea.

The Patriarch Antonios of the Eritrean Orthodox church is still under house arrest as of February 2019. The Eritrean government put him under house arrest in 2006 for protesting the interference in the church affairs by the government. He was first seen publicly since his

detention in 2017 but was refused a request to publicly speak. He is now reportedly being held in a small servant's quarter. The Patriarch is over 90 years old.

As of February 2019, Eritrean army forces have arrested and imprisoned 53 Jehovah Witnesses on account of their faith.

There have been several reported deaths of religiously motivated arrests. According to Erimedrek News and included in the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's report on March 17, 2018, two Pentecostal Christians died after staging a hunger strike to protest their alleged abuse while imprisoned in the Wi'ia Military Camp. Their bodies reportedly showed signs of sexual abuse. In 2018 Habtemichael Tesfamariam and Habtemichael Mekonen died in prison without charges. Most recently Hajji Ibrahim Younus died in January 2019 while in detention; he was over 70 years old. He was arrested in October 2017 along with many others from the Muslim community who protested the attempted expropriation of the Al Diaa private Islamic school by the Government of Eritrea.

In May 2017 the Government conducted house to house raids reportedly for belonging to an unregistered group according to CSW. Approximately 210 evangelical Christians were arrested, and authorities sent them to a prison where they were reportedly imprisoned under harsh conditions. According to CSW's June report to the UN Human Rights Council's Commission of Inquiry on Eritrea, authorities detained 122 Christians: 45 in Adi-Quala, 15 in Ghinda, and 45 and 17 in two separate incidents in Asmara. In August 2018 Human Rights Concern Eritrea reported that Fikadu Debesai, a mother of four who was among those reportedly arrested in May, died in prison. Her husband and 18-year-old son were reportedly held in the Merkel Abiet Prison and Gergera Labor Camp, respectively. All of these imprisonments were solely on account of the prisoner's faith and violated international law and norms which permit the free exercise of religion or belief.

Restrictions and Closure of Religious and Religiously-Affiliated Buildings

In 2002 the Proclamation 73/1995 was applied harshly with the Minister of Information and Culture issuing a decree obliging religious groups not belonging to the four above mentioned branches to cease all religious activities. The groups were then subsequently supplied with extensive registration requirement forms that required the religious groups to include detailed information on members. Meherte Yesus Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Faith Mission religious institutions in development work, the Seventh day Adventist Church, and the Baha'i movement filled out the discriminatory forms but still have not been recognized despite submitting applications. Other evangelical churches refused to comply and have had members arrested and incarcerated.

Recommendations to the Human Rights Council:

We urge the Eritrean government to take the following measures,

- Recognize and register the applications of Meherte Yesus Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Faith Mission religious institutions in development work, the Seventh day Adventist Church, and the Baha'i movement. Each of them has followed the registration process but have not received a confirmation since they applied in 2002.
- Release unconditionally prisoners arrested on the grounds of being unregistered religious groups such as the Pentecostal Christians and Jehovah Witnesses. To treat them with humanity and due process.
- Halt the arrests and detainments of those who have an opposing ideology or adhere to a certain religion in light of Article 9 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states, "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile."

- Grant recognition for the unauthorized religious groups such as the Pentecostals and Jehovah Witnesses in accordance with Articles 22 and 23 of the ICCPR, recognizing the right of assembly and peaceful association.
 - Release Archbishop Antonios who has been kept under house arrest since 2006.
 - Implement the constitution to uphold the freedom of religion.
 - Abolish the Proclamation No. 73/1995 to Standardize and Articulate Religious institutions which has only united the country in suffering but not in thriving.
 - Implement the constitution in line with the Human Rights treaties that the council is set to uphold.
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