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ERITREA: CHRISTIANS ARRESTED FROM HOUSE CHURCH RELEASED

Another 10 Protestants jailed for five years also freed; Muslim leader dies in prison.

LOS ANGELES, February 21 (Compass Direct News) – Security police authorities in Eritrea released 35 evangelical Christians in the port city of Massawa over the weekend after holding them in custody for six weeks at a local police station.

All the jailed Protestants were members of the government-banned Faith of Christ Church. The 35 men and women had been worshipping in a private home on January 6 when security officials raided the house and arrested those present.

The group was denied visitation rights while in police custody, although official charges were never filed against them. According to Protestant sources inside Eritrea, the Massawa Christians were released on Saturday morning (February 16).

Three days earlier, 10 members of the Full Gospel Church who had been incarcerated for five years in Assab's notorious military prison were released on bail. The seven men and three women had been transferred from Assab to the Adi-Abyto prison six months ago.

Local sources confirmed this week that a senior pastor in the Kale Hiwot Church remains imprisoned in Asmara Police Station No. 5 since his arrest nearly five months ago. Pastor Oqbamichael Tekle-Haimanot was jailed last year on October 1.

Previously, he had been subjected to 10 months of solitary confinement and hard labor in the Sawa military camp to punish him for participating in a Protestant Christian wedding in Barentu on January 9, 2005.

Eritrea outlawed its rapidly growing independent Protestant churches in May 2002, closing their buildings and banning them from meeting together even in private homes.

Over the past five years, thousands of Protestant evangelicals have been jailed and severely tortured for months or even years for violating these bans and refusing to return to one of the nation's three "official" churches: Orthodox, Catholic or Evangelical

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Lutheran.

None have been brought to trial, nor have formal charges been filed against them.

Deposed Patriarch Incommunicado

A U.S. congressman's visit to Eritrea in early January has again highlighted the East African nation's stringent efforts to prevent any access to deposed Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios, who has been under house arrest in Asmara since August 2005.



Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios

The 80-year-old Antonios, who suffers from severe diabetes, has been held under guard ever since.

Reportedly Antonios' security restrictions have tightened since Rep. Payne's visit, sources told ICC. Sentries are posted outside his house 24 hours a day, and anyone who enters the compound must be escorted by a security agent. He is allowed no telephone contacts, and rarely are even his relatives allowed to visit him.

During the past month, the government-appointed Dioscoros has been quoted frequently in the Eritrean media, mouthing strident nationalist dogma and the official doctrine that all religious groups in Eritrea coexist in harmony.

Stating that the "cultural and spiritual makeup of the Eritrean people constitute the cornerstone of its unity and steadfastness," Dioscoros declared in a visit to Keren on February 9 that the nation's independence had been insured by the people's commitment to "rebuff" what he called "longstanding acts of enemy quarters to divide Eritrea along religious lines."

Missionary Visas 'Expire'

After making direct steps last August to nationalize the Catholic Church's properties and institutions, Eritrean authorities refused three months ago to renew the residence visas of 13 expatriate Catholic missionaries.

According to International Christian Concern (ICC), Eritrean security agents transferred Antonios to an undisclosed location last month in order to prevent any contact with him by members of a visiting delegation led by U.S. Rep. Donald Payne (D-NJ).

"Ten days after Congressman Payne left the country, the patriarch was returned to his residence," the ICC stated on January 29.

In direct violation of church canons, the Eritrean government forcibly removed Antonios as head of the Eritrean Orthodox Church in January 2006, installing Bishop Abune Dioscoros in his place the following May.



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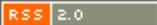
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The priests, nuns and teachers from Italy, Mexico, Kenya, the Philippines, Colombia and the United States were notified on November 6 that they had 14 days to leave the country.

According to Vatican Radio, the missionaries were given two reasons for their expulsion: the Catholic Church's refusal to send its clergy into national military service, and an alleged government restriction limiting foreign employees of non-governmental organizations to a maximum two-year stay in Eritrea.

"We all want to go back," one of the sisters told Catholic News Service. "The people are wonderful, faithful and suffering."

According to one Combonian father quoted by Missionary International Service News Agency, the missionaries ministering in Eritrea as health workers continue to be considered indispensable. To date, no refused renewal of residence visas for expatriate doctors or nurses have been reported.

Gospel Singer Given Asylum

After a 30-month ordeal of solitary confinement and horrendous torture at Eritrea's Mai Serwa military camp and another 10 tense months living in hiding in Sudan, Eritrean gospel singer Helen Berhane was flown to safety and asylum in Denmark last October.



Helen Berhane

According to the London-based advocacy group Release Eritrea, Berhane believed her government was determined to go to whatever ends necessary to squelch her story.

"Helen believes that had she stayed in the country, she would have either been re-arrested or killed, to cover up the atrocities of

A youth worker in the Rema Protestant Church at the time of her arrest on May 13, 2004, Berhane was subjected to severe torture for extended periods. She was jailed in either metal shipping containers or underground cells.

Her refusal to recant her faith, coupled with adoption by Amnesty International as the "face" of their campaign against religious oppression in Eritrea, brought upon her the wrath of Eritrean authorities, who released her only when they feared she would die in prison.

During her 10-month stay in Khartoum, where she was joined by her 13-year-old daughter Eva, Berhane was forced to move from one location to another to avoid being identified and sent back to Eritrea during routine Sudanese government round-ups of Eritrean refugees.

Now in her early 30s, Berhane arrived at the Copenhagen airport on October 19 in a wheelchair, still suffering from severe leg injuries inflicted during prison beatings.



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Malaysia - Indigenous Group Sues Over Demolished Church



Turkey - Murder Suspects Blame Alleged Ringleader



Turkey - Judge Releases Minor Who Threatened Pastor



her ordeal at Mai-Serwa," the advocacy group stated in a press release the day she arrived in Denmark.

Through the efforts of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Berhane gained refugee status under the Sudanese office for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which then expedited her asylum in Denmark.

Berhane continues to receive medical care for her injuries, including severe nerve damage which has permanently impaired her mobility. She and her daughter are both enrolled in Danish language courses.

In a letter published on the Release Eritrea website just before Christmas, Berhane thanked all those who through their prayers and finances and letters had supported her "every step of the way over the last three years."

"I am convinced that it is through your prayers that I was able to survive all the trials I faced," Berhane wrote.

"My fellow prisoners are always in my mind and in my heart," she continued. "I cry for them every day, for I know the situation I left them in. Please carry on praying for them, just like you did for me."

END

*** Photographs of Patriarch Abune Antonios and Helen Berhane are available electronically. Please contact Compass Direct News for pricing and transmittal.

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