

Violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief in Eritrea

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With regards to the rights to freedom of religion or belief, Eritrea accepted several recommendations during the second UPR cycle from Canada, Romania and Japan. The recommendations can be summarized into the following three main points:

1. The need to guarantee freedom of religion or belief to all
2. Ensuring the rights of religious minorities
3. Protecting religious communities from persecution

However even a cursory analysis would reveal far from implementing these recommendations the government has maintained and in many cases worsened the situation of persecution on minority religious groups and extreme interference and control over all religious groups.

During this reporting period Eritrea has continued its long standing policy of not allowing religious groups that the government deemed as 'fundamentalists', despite the fact that all these groups have not posed any cause for concern to the country or the region. To the contrary time and again followers of the prohibited groups have been nothing but upstanding members of their respective communities conducting exemplary private lives and services to their communities and the nation.

The severest persecution on the grounds of religion has been against the Pentecostal churches, who have been imprisoned in their thousands over the last 17 years, many have been driven to exile and some have died in prison.

Currently it is estimated there are about 400 prisoners in various detention facilities in the country, none of them have been presented before a court of law and they haven't been charged with anything either. They are held illegally in contravention of national and international law. The long term prisoners have been there since 2004 and comprise of the senior leaders of the Group. The latest prisoners include tens of people who were detained in the summer of 2018 following their visit to the airport to receive a visiting evangelist from Ethiopia who arrived with the first flight from Ethiopia following the much heralded peace accord.

As mentioned previously death in detention is an issue of concern and often death is as a result of mistreatment and neglect, delay and denial of medical treatment.

A case in example is that of Fecadu Debesay who was detained from her home in Adi-quala in May 2017 and died in Metkel Abiyot a desert detention camp by August of the same year. She was mistreated and treatment was delayed causing

her death. She was married and had four young children. Her husband was also in prison at the time and is currently a refugee in Ethiopia with his children.

The other extreme situation of persecution is against Jehovah's Witnesses who were effectively denied their citizenship by virtue of a presidential decree on October 25, 1994, because they abstained during the independence referendum in 1993 and conscientiously objected to military service in 1992.

By 2017 there were a total of 55 Jehovah's witnesses in prison and they had never been tried or charged. Three of the detained have been in prison since 1994 as they refused to be conscripted into the military.

In March this year two elderly Witnesses, Mr Habtemichael Tesfamariam and Mr Habtemichael Mekonen, were reported to have died in prison of illnesses and it is suspected that they didn't receive the medical care due.

Although these two groups exemplify the situation with 'unsanctioned' groups, the pressure and persecution of those belonging to the supposedly sanctioned groups is also a big problem.

The government fully controls the Orthodox Church, administering Church finances and assets. It appoints its highest officials in disregard to Canonical laws.

Priests oppose are detained and harassed. Many leave the country. The Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios, was illegally removed from office in 2006 and remains under house arrest reportedly under pressure to resign in favour of the pro-government bishop.

The Catholic Church continues to suffer harassment including the closure of seminaries. When the administration of the seminary refused to close the Medhanialem Seminary in Asmara in September 2017, the government forcefully closed it and detained a nun and a priest (they were released a week later). Several clinics and health centres run by the church were closed at the end of 2017.

Muslims have been detained and harassed under various pretexts since 1994. Similarly to the Orthodox they have been suffering increasing interference and demands to handover administration of education facilities.

On 20 October 2017, Hajji Musa Mohammed Nur, the President of Al Daa Islamic School in Asmara, was arrested, along with several others for opposing the government's attempted expropriation of the Al Daa private Islamic school. This was followed by a rare but peaceful demonstration by the community showing the strength of sentiments against the decision.

On 3 March 2018, the family of Haji Musa was told to recover his body from a hospital, he had died the day before in the Police Station, where he had been held

since his arrest. Following his burial, hundreds were arrested, some as young as 13.

Over the last several years the government of Eritrea has on several occasion stated its preferences of the UPR mechanism for addressing human rights concerns. However the records of implimentation of recommendations accepted clearly fall short of the professed commitment.

We urge that the Huan Rights Council (HRC) use this current cycle to include a clearer mechanism tasking the government of Eritrea to live upto its often professed commitments to the UPR process

Recommendations

- ✓ Implementation of the ratified constitution
- ✓ Ensure the full enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief for all citizens in accordance with the constitution and international statutes to which the nation is party, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (ACHPR), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
- ✓ Implement the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT). Eritrea has already acceded to the ICCPR and ACHPR, both of which prohibit the use of torture