

PUBLIC

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UA 121/07 **Prisoner of conscience/detention without trial/incommunicado detention/medical concern**

ERITREA **Abune Antonios (m), aged 79, Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church**

Abune Antonios, the 79-year-old Patriarch, or Head, of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, has been under house arrest in Asmara, the capital, since January 2006. Amnesty International considers him to be a prisoner of conscience. According to unconfirmed reports, Abune Antonios has been held incommunicado for the last five months and is not receiving adequate medical attention for his diabetes. His life may be in danger if he does not receive the treatment that he requires.

Abune Antonios is reportedly under house arrest for protesting against the arrest of three Orthodox priests from the Medhane Alem Orthodox Church and for refusing to cooperate with the government in closing down this Church. The three priests who remain in detention taught the Orthodox faith in a modern style which drew thousands of young followers to Sunday school and bible classes at their Church.

Although the Eritrean Constitution guarantees religious freedom the government has severely curtailed religious expression in Eritrea since 2002. It only recognises Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran Christian churches and Islamic institutions, although official recognition does not prevent on-going scrutiny by the authorities. Faiths which are not officially recognised by the government are not allowed to be practised in Eritrea.

The government of Eritrea is scheduled to announce the appointment of a new Patriarch on 27 May - Pentecost Sunday. The rules set out by the Orthodox Church reportedly forbid the appointment of a new Patriarch while the previous one is still alive, unless official church councils find him guilty of committing flagrant sin or heresy.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Approximately 2,000 members of minority evangelical churches which have been outlawed since 2002, including pastors, and dozens of Orthodox Christians and Muslims, are currently detained incommunicado in harsh conditions without charge or trial. They are often held at army camps in various parts of the country, including the country's main military training centre at Sawa. Some are reported to be held in metal shipping containers or underground prisons. Several detainees have become seriously ill and are rarely provided with adequate medical treatment. Amnesty International has received reports that some detainees have been repeatedly beaten and tied up in painful positions in order to force them to renounce their faith.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- calling for Abune Antonios to be released immediately and unconditionally, as he is a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression and freedom of religion, both of which are guaranteed in the Eritrean Constitution;
- calling on the authorities immediately to allow Abune Antonios the medical attention he requires for his diabetes;
- asking the authorities to ensure that Abune Antonios is given immediate access to his family, colleagues and to a lawyer;
- expressing concern that he has been arbitrarily detained without access to legal redress, contrary to human rights provisions in the Eritrean Constitution and laws, which require that people are brought before a court within 48 hours of their arrest.

APPEALS TO:

President

His Excellency President Issayas Afewerki
Office of the President
P O Box 257, Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 123 788 (via Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

Salutation: Your Excellency

Ms Fawzia Hashim

Minister of Justice

Ministry of Justice

P O Box 241, Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: +2911 126 422

Salutation: Dear Minister

Commissioner of Police

Ministry of Internal Affairs

P O Box 1223, Asmara, Eritrea

Salutation: Dear Commissioner ??

COPIES TO:

Mr Semere Beyene

Director, Department of Religious Affairs

Ministry of Local Government

P O Box 225, Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: +2911 120 014

and to diplomatic representatives of Eritrea accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 4 July 2007.