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MISSIONS

16 Pastors, 900 Christians in Jail in Eritrea, says Persecution Watchdog

by Eunice K. Y. Or
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Compass Direct, a news agency for worldwide Christian persecution, has released approximate figures of the total number of Christians in jail in Eritrea. It was reported that 16 full-time pastors and nearly 900 Eritrean Christians are known to be jailed in local prisons. It is based on a documented list of 883 Christians who have been arrested without trial or charges brought against them. The list has been compiled by a group of evangelicals in Eritrea.

The declining human rights and religious freedoms in this tiny Africa nation has drawn international concern. It has been greatly observed especially as the issue has become one of the highlights during the six-week United Nations Commission on Human Rights' (UNCHR) meeting in Geneva.

In the midst of accusations, the Eritrean government, however, has denied the growing complaints. The Director of the Eritrean President's office, Yemane Gebremeskel responded to accusation by saying they were "groundless", during an interview with AFP on 5th April. He claimed that "human rights groups pick up anything on the internet and give arbitrary figures".

Gebremeskel explained that arrested Christians "are maybe held for five hours and then let off with a warning." In contrast, sources from evangelical Christians have said that only a handful of prisoners have been released but only after being forced to sign pledges to stop attending religious services of the unregistered, so-called "illegal" denominations.

Currently the Eritrean law will only give official recognition to four religious denominations: Muslim, Orthodox, Roman Catholic and the Lutheran Church. Early in May 2002, it ordered all of Eritrea's independent Protestant churches or evangelical churches including Adventist, Presbyterian, Assemblies of God, Methodist, Baptist as well as indigenous Pentecostal and charismatic churches to close down.

For the past three years, the Eritrean government has refused to register any of the nation's fast-growing independent Protestant churches, according to Compass Direct.

Compass Direct released the list of the 16 full-time pastors detained. Half of them are from the Full Gospel Church. They are Dr. Kiflu Gebremeskel, Haile Naizgi, Hagos Abraha, Abraham Belay, Kidane Gebremeskel, Fanuel Mihreteab, Tewelde Gebreab and Kidane Weldu.

Another three of them are from the Sunday School Medhanie-Alem Orthodox Church, which experienced a crackdown on 19th February and 131 children were arrested. While all children were later released by mid-March, Rev. Dr. Futsum Kuluberhan, the Rev. Dr. Tekleab Mengisteab and the Rev. Gebremedhin Georgis have been under arrest since 13th March.

All the other 900 Christians in jail, according to the compiled list, are being detained in prisons in at least 9 regions as well as local police stations. At least 144 of them are women.

Most of the Christians were arrested at prayer meetings in homes of fellow believers or while attending wedding ceremonies. Several others were picked up individually from their homes or offices.

Compass Direct also unveiled the source from local Protestants, saying that popular Christian singer Helen Berhane from the Rema Church has been alternately held in a metal container or locked in solitary confinement in an underground cell as officials attempt to force her to renounce participation in banned Christian services. It has already been 11 months since her arrest.

UK-based Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), a human rights organisation specialising in religious freedom and working on behalf of those persecuted for their Christian beliefs, is now leading a huge outcry against the state of religious freedom in Eritrea.

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