

## ***Eritrean Faith Community Condemnation of the Government of Eritrea gathers international momentum***

By Organising Committee, Concerned Eritrean Catholics in London, UK.  
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In a glorious rainy afternoon of Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> November, Eritreans of all faiths held a protest rally outside Westminster Cathedral - the seat of the Archbishop of Westminster and President of the Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales - supporting the actions of Eritrean bishops and other faith leaders condemning the Government of Eritrea's recent wave of confiscating schools and closing health centres run by the Catholic and other faith groups serving the most disadvantaged sections of people in the country.

Opening the rally with prayer and blessing, Fr Mark White CP of the Passionist Community and Parish Priest of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart in Herne Bay, Kent welcomed the gathering. Following Fr Mark's blessing and braving the rain, a choir from the Holy Redeemer of the Eritrean Catholic Gheez Rite Chaplaincy delighted the hearts of the people gathered by their song 'wereb', a traditional Gheez rite prayer, which further attracted many of the faithful that have been attending the All Souls Day Mass at the Cathedral to join the rally.



*opening prayer by Father Mark White and alongside him Father Mark Odion*

When the Catholic Bishops called for a national reconciliation among its people, following the peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the government of Eritrea ostensibly retaliated, rather than heeding the bishops' advice, by confiscating health centres and schools run by faith groups. Protestors at the rally, sharing their anxiety on the direction their young country, a country once full of hope, is heading to and seemingly becoming an open prison of its citizens, have called for a stop to persistent human rights abuses, the indefinite military conscription, the imprisoning of political and faith leaders, and journalist. The *'very clear pattern of human rights violations and absence of rule of law'* that a panel from the United Nations highlighted recently continue to be unabated and the source of the endless exodus of the country's youth to an extent of becoming the nation's existential threat.

Addressing the rally, Dr Fessehaye W Zemichael, one of the organisers, reiterated the Eritrean bishops' brave call 'for peace and national reconciliation'. "We, who are lucky to be a voice of the voiceless from outside our country, he said, "are gathered here to demonstrate our

support and solidarity with our Catholic bishops in Eritrea". He expressed the deep concern about the ongoing human right violations and the confiscations and nationalisation of the 29 Catholic Church health centres and 7 schools of different faiths that have been operating in the country for over 60 years. He said, 'the Eritrean people are under the yoke of human rights abuses and all their faith groups are victims of religious persecution.



*Father Mark Odion MSP*

Representing the office of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, Bishop Declan Lang Chair of Bishop's Conference Department of International Affairs addressed the rally, through his representative Fr Mark Odion MSP, with a message of solidarity with and prayers for those in Eritrea. He said, 'These healthcare centres are almost exclusively established in rural areas and small towns to serve the needs of the poor and the needy in society,' 'The seizure of these facilities is, therefore, tantamount to a huge depravity of healthcare assistance to a large section of the population and certainly will have a lasting negative effect on the poor and may ultimately lead to the loss of innocent lives.'

He continued and said, 'Through the schools and health facilities, the Catholic Church in Eritrea serves the most vulnerable members of the society: the sick, the poor, the elderly, women and children. In addition, the Catholic Church runs orphanages and maternity wards in those rural communities. To confiscate these facilities and institutions translates to a denial of the fundamental inalienable human rights of the poor Eritreans to education and medical assistance, thus casting a bleak future for those poor and needy nationals.'

The Bishop concluded his address with an appeal to the Eritrean government by saying 'We join in solidarity with the Eritreans here in the UK to appeal to the Eritrea Government to reconsider their decisions and to return the Schools and healthcare facilities back to the Church.'



*Fr Dominic Robinson SJ*

Speaking at the rally also was Fr Dominic Robinson SJ, Parish Priest at the Immaculate Conception in the central London Church and Diocese of Westminster Justice and Peace Commission, who encouraged the gathering to continue praying for Eritrea and its faith leaders and assured that he would be making a special mention of this gathering in his mass at the parish and beyond. Another speaker who gave her witness and experience of the Catholic Church's missionary work in Eritrea was Sister Natalia Gomes of the Camboni Mission who expressed hope for the peace and reconciliation in Eritrea, and that her faith brothers and sisters in Eritrea will be allowed to continue serving the people again soon.

Speaker after speaker from Eritrea's faith leaders of diverse religions, both Christians and Muslims, and civic society representatives, reiterated their solidarity with the Catholic bishops. Deacon Yohannes (John) Ghebrehwet of Eritrean Orthodox Church in Manchester,



UK asked the organisers and gathered people of all faith and civic societies to ask their leaders to work together to expose the dire situation in Eritrea. Adding to what had been said by the main speakers Mr Saeed Mohamed Ahmed further enlightened the people of the intolerable religious persecution inflicted on Muslims from the outset of the country's independence. Dr Berhane Asmelash, representing Release Eritrea, also asked for prayers for those religious leaders who are in prison and demanded strongly all Eritreans around the world to speak loudly against human right abuses. Professor Gaim Kibreab, Director of Refugee Studies at South Bank University also shared his anger at the betrayed promises to the Eritrean people and sadness on the continued human right abuse by the government of Eritrea.

*Deacon John Gebrehwet of Eritrean Orthodox church*

As well as livestreaming via the social media of Facebook and Tweeter, the event had a wide coverage from local, national and international media including [Independent Catholic News](#) (ICN), the [Catholic Church Bishops Conference](#) website, the [BBC's Tigrigna](#) and [Focus on Africa programmes](#), [Assenna TV](#), which is also viewed inside Eritrea.



*Traditional Gheez rite prayer 'wereb' in front of Westminster Cathedral*

\*Attached is a [press release](#) explaining why the rally was organised.