

# ERITREAN CATHOLIC GEE'Z RITE CHAPLAINCY

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Arch Diocese of Toronto -ሰበካ ቶሮንቶ

**November 29, 2019**

## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **In Solidarity with the Catholic Church of Eritrea and Victims of Religious Persecution in Eritrea**

We, Eritrean-Canadians and friends from all parts of Canada, are holding a rally in front of Parliament Hill in Ottawa, 111 Wellington St, to protest the actions taken by the Eritrean government against religious institutions, especially against the confiscation of schools and health centers of the religious institutions. Similar widespread rallies were held in many parts of the world, including the USA and UK.

According to the UN, the Eritrean government has committed crimes against humanity in a widespread and systematic manner, including rape, enslavement and murder. Severe restrictions against religious institutions continued unabated. Thousands of Pentecostals remain in detention. Eritrean Muslims face severe persecution. The highly-respected nonagenarian, Haj Musa, died in prison in March 2018. The 90-year old Patriarch Antonios, the head of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, was forcibly removed from his position and remains in house arrest. Instead of introducing the much-anticipated domestic reforms after the peace deal with Ethiopia signed in July 2018, sadly, the government instead felt emboldened to intensify its repressive measures. The mandatory forced national conscription of young Eritreans is still in place. The ratified constitution of 1997 remains unimplemented. In the aftermath of the peace accord, more than 20, 000 Eritreans fled Eritrea and crossed into Ethiopia and Sudan to seek refugee protection.

The Catholic Church has a long record of providing vital health and education services to the poor and vulnerable segment of the Eritrean population. When the Eritrean Catholic church called for peace and reconciliation, the government launched a military raid on June 12, 2019. With this military raid, the government forcefully confiscated schools and health centers of all faith groups, which includes 29 Catholic Church health centers and seven schools that have been serving people of all faith for more than a century. The Bishops have written a persuasive letter opposing the actions and pleaded the authorities to return their properties. As the Catholic Bishops put it, “seizure of the educational and health institutions are contrary to the rights and the legitimate freedom of the Church and heavily limit the exercise of the postulates of faith, mission and social services.” To date, their plea has fallen on deaf ears.

The Eritrean Catholic Church is now confined to its church buildings and is prohibited from its rights to offer free health care and education. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of vulnerable Eritreans, including pregnant women, the elderly and children residing in remote areas, are denied to access these vital services.

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Through our rally, we would like to express our solidarity with the Catholic Bishops, Patriarch Antonios and all the victims of religious persecution in Eritrea. Faith groups in Eritrea are facing persecution and restrictions unseen in their long and illustrious history. They need the support of

the international community, the Canadian public and the government. Moreover, the Eritrean people need and deserve the full services of their religious institutions.

Hence, we request the Canadian government to remain seized of the matter and to use its resources at its disposal to:

- 1. Request the Eritrean government to reverse its decision to close and confiscate, healthcare centers, clinics and hospitals run by the Catholic Church and other religious institutions in Eritrea.**
- 2. Free all individuals or groups incarcerated or placed under house arrest, due to their faith in Eritrea;**
- 3. Respect and follow international human rights laws, religious freedoms & liberty, and implement the rule of law in Eritrea.**

Yours Sincerely,

Organizing Committee

Eritrean Catholic Gee`z Rite Chaplaincy

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