

Students Told to Remove Crosses as Private Schools Go Public

Eritrea's security forces shot at protesters, using live ammunition, in the capital Asmara on Tuesday (October 31) during a protest against the government's plans to turn all schools public. This would mean forbidding students from wearing religious items such as Christian crosses or Muslim headscarves.

A local source told World Watch Monitor students had been told the move was "to prevent interreligious strife".

According to the Eritrean news site Asmarino Independent, the Eritrean government has had longstanding plans to transform all schools into "community," or public, schools. In September it notified the schools, saying the changes would take place with immediate effect.

The website reports that one of the schools which received the notification was the Catholic Medhanie Alem Secondary School in Asmara. In the letter, dated September 18, the regional minister of education is said to have ordered the school leadership "to close the school and to report to the [regional administration] the list of all the students."

The minister cited a 1995 government declaration, stating that all social activities, such as private schools, clinics and orphanages, should be government-controlled. The role and responsibility of the churches was solely to look after the spiritual needs of its members, it said.

When the Catholic Church refused, the government reportedly closed the school and incarcerated a nun, sister Tinsaw, and a priest, Abba Haile Paulos.

It has been 15 years since the government introduced a law prohibiting Christian practice outside of the Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran denominations, as well as Sunni Islam.

But even the sanctioned Catholic Church says the government has tried to isolate the community “by not permitting its seminarians, priests and religious workers to go abroad for further education,” the Asmarino Independent reports, saying it is because the church objects to its clergy being forced to become conscripts in the indefinite and compulsory military service imposed in Eritrea.

Protest

Following the government’s announcement, Al Diaa Islamic School, a well-known private school in Asmara, asked for time to consult the wider school community. The Honorary President Haji Musa Mohamed Nur spoke passionately during a meeting on October 15 which, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, was attended by thousands of people who expressed their rejection of the proposed expropriation. He was arrested a few days later and, along with several others, taken into custody.

Some 100 students from the school then apparently took to the streets to protest and request the release of Haji Musa and the others. CSW reports how they encountered armed security officials who allegedly assaulted them as the crowd of protesters grew. When they in turn responded by throwing stones, security officials started shooting, using live ammunition. Online footage shows people being chased through the streets and the sounds of gunfire can be heard. The U.S. Embassy in Eritrea “received reports of gunfire in several locations in Asmara due to protests” and advised its citizens to avoid the city center.

Although calm was restored by the end of Tuesday, armed undercover security officials still patrolled the streets,

according to the Asmarino. It says some students and women who were detained have been released, but some of them say they were mistreated by police in order to obtain information. Meanwhile, the school was “quietly” reopened.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of CSW said: “The targeting of educational establishments belonging to two of the faith communities which are permitted to function in the country is indicative of an enduring unwillingness to respect and protect both the right to education and the right of freedom of religion or belief”.

Background

As there are no independent news sources in Eritrea, news of the protest only reached international news media a day after the event. Protests are an extremely rare occurrence in Eritrea, one of the most repressive countries in the world.

Dubbed the “North Korea of Africa”, the Eritrean regime is authoritarian and intolerant towards any form of unregistered organization, dissent or free expression. There is no safe place in the country—as is confirmed by the large number of Eritrean refugees in Europe and elsewhere.

Although there are no reliable statistics on religious affiliation in the country, sources estimate the country is half Christian and half Sunni Muslim.

Eritrea is 10th on the Open Doors 2017 World Watch List of the 50 countries in which it is most difficult to live as a Christian.

Arrests of Christians have escalated in the past year. A new wave of arrests that began in May saw the number of evangelical Christian prisoners rise to more than 200. Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians are at particular risk, although the Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch, Abune Antonios, has been under house arrest since 2007 after he refused to comply

with government attempts to interfere with church affairs.

In July, the European Parliament passed a resolution condemning “systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations” in Eritrea. This followed a report by a U.N. commission that the country’s “crimes against humanity” should be investigated by the International Criminal Court.
{eoa}

This article originally appeared on World Watch Monitor.