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## **ERITREA | Government Clampdown Sparks Protest**

Infringements on the right to education of children from two of Eritrea's permitted religious groups caused a rare show of public resistance against the Eritrean government, which has been deemed by a United Nations (UN) Commission of Inquiry to have been committing crimes against humanity since 1991.

On Oct. 20, Hajji Musa Mohammed Nur, a nonagenarian and the respected Honorary President of Al Diaa Islamic School in Asmara, was arrested, along with several others who were taken into custody in diverse parts of the city. All had expressed opposition to the government's decision to expropriate the Al Diaa Islamic School in line with a plan devised by the Ministry of Education in 2014 that will transfer control of every school to local communities. Al Diaa was established in the late 1960s, and is run by parent committees as a private Islamic school. Transferring schools to the control of local communities would mean that religious schools such as Al Diaa would become nondenominational and be open to the public.

Prior to his arrest, thousands of people had gathered in the school compound Oct. 15 to be briefed by Hajji Musa and other board members on the issue and to express their rejection of the proposed expropriation. According to Gedab news, a few weeks earlier the security forces had also detained a dozen people at a funeral in Adi Guedad on the outskirts of Asmara, as they returned from the burial.

On Oct. 31, students gathered in the Akhria neighborhood in the north of Asmara requesting the release of Hajji Musa and other detainees. As their numbers grew, security personnel allegedly began to assault them indiscriminately. The protestors eventually responded by throwing stones, and the security personnel countered by opening fire using live ammunition. Footage continues to emerge of troops shooting at and chasing unarmed civilians through the streets of the capital. Security personnel also allegedly arbitrarily detained young people. Claims by opposition groups of 28 casualties could not be independently verified. However, in an

indication of the seriousness of the situation, the United States Embassy in Asmara issued a security message to U.S. citizens on Oct. 31 stating it had “received reports of gunfire in several locations in Asmara due to protests” and advising them to “avoid the downtown where protests appear to be more prevalent.”

According to the Asmara-based activist network Arbi Harnet, the school has been “quietly” reopened and a few students and women have been released. However, some reportedly suffered mistreatment while in detention.

The Catholic Church has been targeted in a similar manner. According to a report on the Eritrean website Asmarino.com, on Sept. 17, the Education Minister for the Central Region (Zoba Ma’ekel) wrote to the Director of the Medhane Alem Secondary School in Asmara demanding the closure of the school and a list of all of its students. The letter, which was copied to the Minister of Education, the office of the Eritrean Police and the Chief of Police of Zoba Ma’ekel, cited Proclamation 73 of 1995, which defines and regulates the activities of religious groups. Among other things, the proclamation states that the provision of social amenities rests within the remit of the government, while religious organizations should confine themselves to attending to the spiritual wellbeing of adherents. Following an unfruitful appeal to officials, church leaders decided not to close the school. The government’s response was to detain Abba Haile Paulos, a diocesan priest who volunteered to take the place of the school’s director, and Sr. Tinsae, a Comboni nun.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 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. There can no longer be any doubt about the true nature of the Eritrean regime; a government that can fire live ammunition in broad daylight at unarmed protestors, most of whom are school children, is more than capable of committing the atrocity crimes for which it stands accused. We reiterate our call for renewed international efforts towards establishing justice mechanisms to hold perpetrators to account. We also reiterate the fact that the desire to escape unremitting, comprehensive and severe human rights violations is at the heart of Eritrea’s refugee exodus. We urge the international community once again to respect the principle of non-refoulement, and to ensure sanctuary and protection to Eritreans who have fled their country.”