



31 March 2020

The Honourable François-Philippe Champagne, MP
Minister of Foreign Affairs
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6
Francois-Philippe.Champagne@parl.gc.ca

Dear Minister,

I am writing to you on behalf of the bishops of Canada to bring to your attention the profound concern of Eritrean Catholics living in Canada with regards to serious human rights' violations presently occurring in Eritrea.¹ Many of these violations fall specifically within the domain of religious freedom.

Several news reports in 2019 substantiate what Eritrean-Catholics in Canada have heard from their friends and relatives still living in Eritrea. Indeed, despite hopes raised in 2018 with the Eritrea-Ethiopia peace deal and also with the signing of a peace agreement in Saudi-Arabia, the international community has recently seen not only the continuation, but the escalation of religious persecution throughout Eritrea, including the suppression of religious institutions.

In 2019 alone, twenty-one Catholic hospitals and other medical facilities, including the convents situated on hospital grounds, were forcibly closed by the Eritrean government, depriving thousands of people, especially mothers and children in rural areas, of well-established, necessary, and effective health care.² Also in 2019, several private schools belonging to Christians and Muslims were confiscated by the Eritrean government, some of which were closed, others being forced to become public or to change teachings and policies, such as having to remain open on holy days.³ The Catholic bishops of Eritrea have publicly voiced their opposition to the Eritrean government's interference with Catholic educational and health-care institutions, speaking in defense of the freedom of religion, and asking for dialogue with government officials in order to resolve differences; but their pleas, so far, have gone unheard.

¹ For example, see "Eritrean Ex-pats fear for the church in homeland" in *Grandin Media*, <https://grandinmedia.ca/eritrean-ex-pats-fear-for-the-church-in-homeland-as-government-persecution-grows/> (Accessed 26 March 2020).

² "Eritrea's seizure of Roman Catholic Church properties criticized" in BBC, 17 June 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-48660723> (Accessed 26 March 2020).

³ "Eritrean Church protests handling of Cardinal Berhaneyesus" in *Vatican News*, 3 March 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/africa/news/2020-03/eritrean-church-protests-handling-of-cardinal-berhaneyesus.html> (Accessed 26 March 2020).

Unfortunately, the intrusion of the state in the affairs of religious institutions does not appear to be the extent of oppression under Eritrean political leadership, but is rather the pretext for justifying further violence against people of faith. This undeniable pattern, established over many years, suggests a state threatened by any form of expression which could challenge the *status quo*. On this matter, I cannot help but to draw your attention to the 2019 USCIRF Report, with which you are undoubtedly familiar.⁴ The Report describes in detail the numerous human rights violations committed against people of almost every faith in Eritrea. These violations include the arbitrary arrest and imprisonment of children on account of their religious beliefs (p. 46); the torture of prisoners who can also be deprived of food and needed medical attention (p.46), the prohibition preventing smaller faith groups from owning houses, worshipping or congregating, such as praying in groups (p.46), and the use of live ammunition on demonstrators to discourage resistance (p.48). Many of these violations and others, including the extensive use of torture and forced labor in prisons, are also reported in the 2015 and 2016 reports of the *UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea* (COI-E).

The reports coming out of Eritrea cannot be met with complacency and silence. They compel each of us as human beings, and Canada as a nation, to advocate strongly for the immediate establishment and guarantee of all human rights in that country. The bishops of Eritrea themselves have led the charge with their 2014 pastoral letter *Where is my brother?*, in which they tried to infuse hope in younger generations who began fleeing the country during the period of mass migrations, while recognizing the unfavorable social conditions which they faced. It bears noting that social conditions have not improved, for USCIRF again in 2019 designated Eritrea as a “country of particular concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The bishops’ position as human rights’ advocates, however, remains tenuous and can even provoke government retaliation. Earlier this year, the President of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Bishops’ Conference, His Eminence Berhaneyesus Demerew Cardinal Souraphiel, was abruptly denied entry into Eritrea from Ethiopia, being turned back at the border, even after he had obtained a one-month visa to participate in the Golden Jubilee and Patronal feast of the Cathedral Church of Kidanemhret in Asmara.

Minister Champagne, I bring these matters to your consideration because we, the bishops of this country, believe Canada has a role to play and has the capacity to respond effectively to improve the conditions of life for the people of Eritrea. In unison with Eritrean Catholics in Canada, the bishops of Canada would be pleased to see the Government of Canada act decisively, perhaps through its diplomatic channels, in order to bring religious persecution and human rights’ violations in Eritrea to an end, once and for all. Echoing the recommendations made by USCIRF in its 2019 Report to the U.S. Government (p. 43), such diplomatic interventions could make specific requests of the government of Eritrea, including at least:

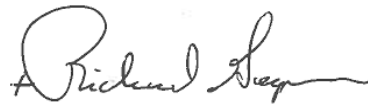
- the release of all prisoners held on account of their peaceful religious practices, including His Holiness Abune Antonios, Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the return of all church properties confiscated by the government;

⁴ *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. 2019. Annual report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. Washington, DC: U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, pp. 44.49. <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf> (Accessed 26 March 2020).*

- the end to religious persecution of any unregistered religious groups and allowing members of such groups all human rights accorded to all other citizens; and
- the immediate cessation of all crimes against humanity and the acceptance of and cooperation with unrestricted visits by the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the International Red Cross.

Fully recognizing the complex nature of this request, but equally mindful of that which is at stake should Canada remain silent, I wish to thank you, in advance, for your considered attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Richard Gagnon".

The Most Rev. Richard Gagnon
Archbishop of Winnipeg and
President of the Canadian Conference
of Catholic Bishops

Cc.: The Hon. Leona Alleslev, M.P.
Leona.Alleslev@parl.gc.ca