

**The Eritrean faith community in the UK speak out against the seizure and closure of
Schools and Healthcare facilities in Eritrea**

An address in solidarity with the Eritrean Community in the United Kingdom on the occasion of “*a day of witness and vigil for the Eritrea people and Catholic Church*” delivered by the Right Reverend Declan Lang, chairperson of the International Department of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, represented by Rev Fr Mark Odion, MSP, at the Piazza of Westminster Cathedral, Victoria Street, London SW1P 1QW on Saturday 2nd November 2019.

Preamble

The spirit of Lord Yahweh has been given to me, for Yahweh has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken; to proclaim liberty to captives, freedom to those in prison; to proclaim a year of favour from Yahweh, a day of vengeance for our God, to comfort all those who mourn and to give them for ashes a garland; for mourning robe the oil of gladness, for despondency, praise. {Isaiah 61: 1 – 3a} (The Jerusalem Bible, Popular Edition)

Governments all over the World are established on the principle of the good of the populace, promotion of justice, peace and harmonious co-existence of all peoples. These are the objectives that legitimize the principle of autonomy of states as independent political entities that serve the needs of their own people and in their relationship with other nations of the world. These inalienable human rights which are the sole aim and objective of nation states are equally attested to by the United Nations’ Chart on Human Rights.

The Confiscation of Schools and Healthcare Facilities

The Catholic Church as an institution, respects all lawfully and constitutionally established governments all over the world and recognizes their autonomy as sovereign states, and thus collaborates with all governments in the areas of the promotion of human rights, the right to freedom of worship and ownership of legitimate property, as well as the promotion of human development through the establishment and ownership of Schools, Healthcare facilities, and in the charity work of assisting those deprived of necessities of life through warfare and other inhuman situations such as refugees, slavery, natural disasters, and other sundry inhuman situations that cause human sufferings and the degradation of the human dignity of the human person.

In line with, and in the spirit of the above stated stance of the Catholic Church, we wish to state that it is with deepest sadness that we received the news of the closure of some schools run by the Catholic Church, other Christian-faith communities and the Muslim communities in Eritrea; as well as the seizure and confiscation of privately owned health facilities belonging to the Catholic Church in Eritrea.

It is on record, and is a sad reality indeed, that this year alone 21 healthcare centres were confiscated all over Eritrea. In the previous years, a total of 8 of such healthcare centres were nationalized, resulting now to a total of 29 healthcare centres forcibly seized by the Eritrean government. 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, 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.

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.

Our sympathy and solidarity

Our heart-felt message of solidarity goes to the Eritrean community in the UK and the entire Catholic family in Eritrea over the unlawful and unconstitutional confiscation of Schools and healthcare institutions owned by the Catholic Church which were established with the sole aim of elevating and improving the human conditions of the poor people in Eritrea.

We, therefore, express our solidarity with you at this difficult times. We are aware of the great remarkable humanitarian service that the Church's healthcare centres provide to the to all the people of Eritrea and we were distressed to learn of the recent decision by the government to close the healthcare centre and the schools. The Church's witness in trying to provide the best healthcare to the people of your country, especially the poorest and most vulnerable, is a visible sign of its commitment to the good of Eritrea, and its fidelity to the Gospel.

We assure the Eritrea community in the UK and the Catholic community in Eritrea and their Bishops of our prayers. We commit the situation into the hands of God, with the hope that positive solution will soon be reached that will lead to the restoration of the Schools and health institutions by the government to their rightful owners for the wellbeing and progress of the people of Eritrea.

We continue to ask for the intercession of our Lady, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of our Lord Jesus, and the those of all the faithful departed on this day that we commemorate their memorial, that the Lord God will touch the hearts of the Government of Eritrea to realise that in confiscating the Schools and healthcare facilities, the poor, the sick, the elderly, women, children and the young people are denied their life and their future. We, therefore, 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.