News

Eritreans gather in front of the Catholic cathedral in the capital of Asmara on the eve of Marty

Eritreans gather in front of the Catholic cathedral in the capital of Asmara on the eve of Martyrs Day June 19. The observance recalls those who died in the country's struggle for independence. Formerly a province of Ethiopia, the northeast African nation of Eritrea won independence in 1993. Although about half of the population is Christian, Catholics account for less than 4 percent. (CNS photo from Reuters) (June 21, 2005)

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An agricultural technical school in Eritrea is the latest to fall under government control, in a string of forced seizures of Catholic schools and hospitals.

Church sources said Hagaz Agricultural and Technical Boarding School, which the LaSallian Christian Brothers have been running in southwestern Eritrea was taken over Aug. 23.

"The government wanted the brothers to stay until early September, but the brothers were not happy with the way things were going, so they decided to hand it over," Br. Weldetsen Dekin, an Eritrean LaSallian brother in Nairobi, told Catholic

News Service.

The brothers have run the school for 23 years, offering young people training in agriculture-related fields, including mechanics, animal rearing, horticulture, soil conservation and irrigation.

In 2019, the government confiscated or shut down seven educational institutions ranging from basic to intermediate primary schools across the country and forcibly took over more than 29 health institutions.

"All the schools and clinics that the regime has taken up so far: Many are (now) abandoned, others are in use with very low quality of the service offered. The greatest damage is to the population, which loses a quality service," Fr. Mussie Zerai, an Eritrean priest who works with migrants, told Catholic News Service. "Religion is not only liturgy and prayer, but is also concrete acts of charity. With these closures, the regime tries to limit the church's charitable and witnessing actions in civil society."

A source within the Salesian brothers said senior officials have confirmed that, in September, the government plans to take over the Don Bosco Technical School in Dekemhare, Eritrea's second-largest city. The school offers training in building construction, metal work, automotive mechanics and carpentry, among other skills, to about 160 students a year.

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"The church is not speaking about it. They believe it will do no good and will have many repercussions. The place (Eritrea) is not safe," said the source, who could not be named for safety reasons.

Some of the institutions being confiscated were built during the Italian colonial period, which ended in 1941, and serve students from poor backgrounds.

The government has explained that the institutions' takeover is in accordance with the 1995 proclamation that seeks to "legally standardize and articulate religious institutions and activities." Eritrea recognizes only four registered religious groups: Catholic, Eritrean Orthodox, Evangelical Lutheran and Sunni Islam.

"The level of restriction is extreme. Any criticism is severely punished, and those at home take the punishment for any of relatives in exile," said a Catholic Church source who could not be named for security reasons.

Human rights groups say the school seizures are made to feed into the government's policy of forced conscription into the military and public service. The forced conscription has sent thousands of young Eritreans into exile, according to the Human Rights Watch.

Eritrean Catholic bishops recently wrote the government to express sadness over government actions. They said the church will never cease to claim the return of the social institutions forcefully taken, as well as the church's right to carry out social services.

In April 2019, the bishops called for national reconciliation through a commission that would campaign for truth and reconciliation, but the government responded to this by seizing the church's health institutions.