News

Passengers are processed at the immigration section after arriving at Asmara International Ai

Passengers are processed at the immigration section after arriving at Asmara International Airport in Asmara, Eritrea, July 18, 2018. Eritrean authorities are continuing to detain Catholic Bishop Fikremariam Hagos Tsalim of Segheneity, who was arrested at the airport Oct. 15, 2022. (CNS photo/Tiksa Negeri, Reuters)

Frederick Nzwili

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Eritrean authorities are continuing to detain Catholic Bishop Fikremariam Hagos Tsalim of Segheneity, who was arrested at the Asmara International Airport Oct. 15.

After the Catholic Church queried about the situation and his whereabouts, government authorities confirmed the bishop, who turns 52 Oct. 23, is in their custody. Tsalim was picked up soon after returning from a trip to Europe, but as of Oct. 18, government authorities had not given any reasons for his detention.

Fides, news agency of the Pontifical Mission Societies, said Tsalim and two other priests were being held at Adi Abeto prison.

"We have received this ominous news (of the arrest) with immense pain and bewilderment at what is happening in our country," Fr. Mussie Zerai, a Catholic priest of Eritrean origin who works with migrants, told Catholic News Service. "Our hope (is) that all priests and the bishop currently in custody will be released as soon as possible."

On Oct. 11, security agents arrested Fr. Mihratab Stefanos, the priest in charge of St. Michael's Catholic Church in the diocese. Another Catholic priest, identified as

Capuchin Abbot Abraham, was detained in the western town of Teseney.

The arrests come at a time when Eritrea continues to forcefully conscript youth into the military for the war in the neighboring Ethiopian province of Tigray. In September, soldiers rounded up boys and girls in the at the parish of Medhanie Alem in the village of Akrur, part of the diocese.

Tsalim has been serving the diocese since 2012, when he was ordained its first bishop.

"We ask for the solidarity of all African bishops and the whole Catholic Church in Africa, who pray for their liberation and for peace throughout the Horn of Africa region. The people of this region are exhausted by war and famine and the absence of lasting peace," said Zerai.

Recently, internal discontent has brewed in the Horn of Africa country because of its involvement in war in neighboring Ethiopia between the Tigray People's Liberation Front and the government forces and allied militias. The Eritrean government has intensified youth mobilization for the war, forcing many young adults to hide or flee the country.

According to a Catholic Church source from Adigrat who could not be named for safety reasons, Tsalim has been outspoken against the war in Tigray.

"I think he is being persecuted for his opposition to the war. He is one of those clerics in Eritrea who have not been silent about the atrocities committed by the forces in Adigrat. He recently told the people not to purchase the 'loot' from Tigray," said the source. "My fear is that more Catholic clerics in both countries will be targeted."

Only 4% of Eritrea's 6 million population is Catholic. Although the church is one of the four religious groups allowed in the country, the government has recently confiscated its schools, educational and health institutions.

Under the leadership of President Isaias Afwerki, for 30 years the country has not developed a functional constitution nor has it held national elections.

It is against this background that the country's Catholic bishops recently called for democratic rule and an end to the dictatorship.

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