News

A Black man with glasses and a bishop's clothing looks at the camera

Eritrean Bishop Fikremariam Hagos Tsalim of Segheneity is seen in this undated photo. The 52-year-old bishop had spent Christmas 2022 in prison, but was released shortly after. (CNS photo/courtesy Eritrean Catholics for Peace and Justice)

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Eritrean authorities have freed Catholic Bishop Fikremariam Hagos Tsalim after 75 days in prison.

Tsalim, the 52-year-old bishop of Segheneity, an eparchy in the southern part of Eritrea, had spent Christmas in prison.

A video emerged Dec. 28 showing the prelate being greeted by priests and women religious in the cathedral in Asmara, the Eritrean capital. Archbishop Menghesteab Tesfamariam of Asmara was present at the meeting.

Authorities also released Fr. Mihreteab Stefanos, a priest from the eparchy who had been detained with the bishop in the Adi Abeto prison, according to reports.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Ethiopia and Eritrea offered no immediate comment on the release. However, Catholic clergy sources, citing posts on Twitter, confirmed Tsalim was free. Earlier, reports indicated the Vatican had accelerated diplomatic efforts to gain his release.

"I can confirm he is free, but I do not have any further details. My other concern is that we are dealing with a very toxic state," said a Catholic priest from the neighboring Ethiopian region of Tigray; he asked to remain unidentified because of safety concerns.

On Twitter, a post by Araya Yodit was accompanied by a photo showing the bishop meeting women religious.

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"Bishop Fikremariam Hagos is free. Both the bishop and Father Mihreteab are free," the post said.

Security agents arrested Tsalim Oct.15 at Asmara International Airport as he returned from a trip to Europe.

The detention came under the government of Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki, who has been in office since 1993. Eritrea, a nation in the Horn of Africa, gained its independence from neighboring Ethiopia in 1991. The country has no functional constitution or national elections.

Catholics in Eritrea comprise less than 5% of the population of 6 million people.

The bishop's detention led governments worldwide to call for his release. On Feb. 9, Patriarch Abune Antonios, 94, of the Eritrean Orthodox Church died while in detention. He had been held for 16 years after resisting orders to excommunicate thousands of church members.

Afwerki shut down most Christian churches two decades ago and today only Catholic, Orthodox and Lutheran churches and Sunni Muslim mosques have the legal authority to operate, but they face many restrictions.

Although the government had not given reasons for the arrests, observers said they believe Tsalim was detained for criticizing forced youth recruitment for the war in

the neighboring Tigray region of Ethiopia. The war has since ended with the negotiation of a peace agreement. He had also reportedly questioned the government's seizure of church-owned schools and clinics.