



5.12.2010

UGANDA Refugee in hiding following threat from Eritrean official

An Eritrean refugee and former prisoner has gone into hiding after allegedly receiving a threat from the head of the Eritrean diplomatic mission in Uganda.

Mr. Yonas Embye, a journalist who spent four years in detention before escaping from Eritrea, had been staging a weekly one-man protest outside foreign embassies, the African Union office and other key locations in Kampala, calling for the release of other detained Eritrean journalists and justice for Eritrea's estimated 20,000 prisoners of conscience. According to Mr Embye, last week the Eritrean Consul pulled up in a vehicle and threatened to kidnap and forcibly repatriate him within 24 hours. Mr Embye reported the incident to local authorities, but has gone into hiding, fearing for his life.

Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda have come under increasing pressure since the opening of an Eritrean Consulate in Kampala. Several report receiving threatening telephone calls from Embassy officials, forcing many to change locations and numbers. In addition, earlier this year, many refugees and asylum seekers were coerced by consulate officials into signing a petition opposing the imposition of UN sanctions against Eritrea, and now live in fear of a backlash from the Ugandan Government, which drafted the Security Council Resolution that authorized them.

This is not the first time Eritrean diplomatic officials have been implicated in questionable behavior. Refugees in Kenya experienced some respite from official pressure in 2009, after Eritrean diplomats were expelled from the country "on security-related grounds". During a recent visit to Uganda, CSW learned that several people had fled from southern Sudan after an Eritrean official had reportedly warned refugees never to challenge him in any way "because we can do what we want with you here".

Tina Lambert, CSW's Advocacy Director, says "The intimidation and harassment of refugees in Uganda and elsewhere by Eritrean diplomatic missions constitutes a serious abuse of diplomatic privilege, and it will continue until robust action is taken to end it. We urge the Government of Uganda to emulate the actions of the Kenyan Government and move swiftly to end this outrageous breach of diplomatic practice, and if necessary, expel diplomats who are found to be abusing and harassing vulnerable people who are entitled to protection under international law."