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Aid to the Church in Need (05.12.2012) - Forced military conscription in Eritrea is leaving the Church seriously understaffed as seminarians and other Church workers are forced to join the army.

A source close to the Catholic Church in Eritrea who requested anonymity, fearing reprisals for speaking out, has told Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) that "compulsory military service is bleeding the Church in Eritrea to death."

The Church's work in parishes has become increasingly difficult as Christian workers, including many seminarians, have been kept in military service, many of them for more than 15 years.

The government does not set a fixed period for military service, claiming the threat of war is high.

Seminarians were technically exempt from military service between 2008 and 2011, but reports received by ACN suggest many of those conscripted in 2008 were still in training camps.

But, the source said, "The government exaggerates the danger of war as a pretext to keep people in military service."

The government was also accused of creating "an atmosphere of permanently imminent war in order to keep people in line."

ACN was told that Eritrea's communist government "even wants to arm priests."

The source added that all of Eritrea's inhabitants, including housewives, have been encouraged to own weapons.

Those who have refused military service are among more than 2,000 Christians still imprisoned for their religious beliefs.

Most of these detained are members of non-recognized churches, as a 1995 government decree only formally recognized the Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, Evangelical Lutherans and Islam as religions.

While conscription has radically reduced the number of pastoral workers in the Church, its charitable activities have also suffered from state interference.

ACN was told, "The Church has been forbidden to carry out charitable work. The government wants us to restrict ourselves to the church and vestry."

A 1995 decree reserves all social and welfare projects to the state, but the Church has so far resisted attempts to seize Catholic schools and other projects.

The source added, "In general, military service has led to a situation where there is a shortage of qualified workers in many professions, not just in the Church."

ACN was also told that many Eritreans were leaving the country. Up to one million Eritreans already live abroad, "so the country is losing valuable potential."

The source added, "In addition, young people who stay in Eritrea are already abroad in spirit, it's often claimed in Catholic circles."

"There is a widespread view that if you stay, you're stupid."

Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993 after a thirty-year conflict.

At the present time there are about 5.2 million people living in the North African country, and 47.3% of the population is Christian.

Most of these are Orthodox, with Catholics making up just 4% of the population.
