

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 64/004/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 217
18 September 2003

Embargo Date: 18 September 2003 01:00 GMT

Eritrea: Continued detention of prisoners of conscience and new arrests of members of religious groups

On the second anniversary of their arrests, Amnesty International is urging the Eritrean government to release 11 members of parliament and 10 journalists who have been detained without charge or trial. They are prisoners of conscience imprisoned solely for expressing their non-violent opinions.

"Although their detention is blatantly unlawful and violates constitutional protections for human rights, the government continues to brush aside all criticism," the organization said.

The Eritrean government has continually refused to say where they are held or to allow access to their families. Three were ill when arrested and there have been fears for their safety if they were not allowed medical treatment.

"Their families should at the least be immediately allowed to see them regularly so as to be assured that they are safe and are not being ill-treated," Amnesty International appealed.

A few hundred other government opponents and critics, including children and girls, have been arrested since the major crackdown starting two years ago on 18 September 2001 against peaceful dissent and an emergent democratic reform movement.

In further repression of the right to freedom of opinion and belief, there have also been new recent arrests of members of religious faiths. Arrests also continue against people refusing military conscription or deserting it.

"The widespread and continuing arrests of prisoners of conscience, including peaceful political critics and members of religious groups, and their unlawful secret detention without charge, demonstrate a pattern of general disregard for the rule of law, the Bill of Rights in the Constitution adopted in 1997, as well as the international and regional human rights treaties which Eritrea has signed or ratified," Amnesty International said.

"This seems to give a message that the protection of basic human rights has little meaning in Eritrea. The government must act urgently to free all prisoners of conscience. Other political prisoners should be given fair trials without further delay; secret detention, torture and "disappearances" must stop;

and national service regulations should be revised to allow the right to conscientious objection."

Background

Members of parliament in prison: The eleven detained members of the parliament were leading figures in the independent struggle by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (now the government), alongside President Issayas Afewerki. They include the country's vice-president and former foreign minister, Mahmoud Ahmed Sheriffo; two other former foreign ministers, Haile Woldetensae and Petros Solomon; and the former army chief, Ogbe Abraha. They had led a growing new movement calling for democratic reform and a multi-party political system with fair and free elections.

Journalists in detention: The independent press, which had published the views of the dissenting members of parliament, was completely shut down at the same time as these detentions. Ten prominent and outspoken editors and journalists were also detained.

The ten journalists were initially held quite openly but after they went on hunger strike they too were taken to secret prisons (of which there are many in Eritrea) and have never been seen or heard of since. The detained journalists include Fessahaye "Joshua" Yohannes, an EPLF veteran and poet; Medhanie Haile, a lawyer; and Seyoum Tsehaye, former head of the state television service. Three other journalists in the state media were detained later, one was detained in 2000, and Aklilu Solomon, a reporter for the US-based Voice of America radio station, was detained and re-conscripted in July 2003, despite apparently having a medical exemption. This brings to 15 the number of journalists currently held in secret detention.

Further arrests including conscripts and returnees: The 18 September 2001 detentions were followed by further waves of new dissenters and critics in the civil service and military particularly. Some had publicly called for change, others apparently were held for criticising the government in private remarks. There have been numerous detentions in the conscript army.

Conscription for men and women between 18 and 40 officially lasts for 18 months (6 months military training and 12 months development service) but in practice is indefinite. There is no right to conscientious objection. This has become the main cause of the flight of asylum-seekers.

Over 200 Eritreans - mainly army deserters - who were forcibly returned by Malta in late 2002 have not been seen since; others are currently detained in Malta and Libya and at risk of deportation. Others have had asylum applications rejected in the United Kingdom and elsewhere and fear being deported.

Religious persecution: Religious persecution has risen again in recent months, even though the government professes respect for the guarantees of religious freedom in the laws and Constitution. On 7 September, 12 members of the Eritrean Bethel Church, including two children, were arrested at a prayer meeting in Asmara. On 19 and 20 August over 200 teenage school-children sent for a vacation course to Sawa military barracks under the new education regulations were beaten for possessing bibles. 27 girls and 30 boys are still reportedly imprisoned incommunicado in unventilated, over-crowded and extremely hot shipping containers, without inadequate food or medical care.

In early 2003 several hundred members of a dozen Christian minority churches were arrested without any reason given, tortured and detained without charge for several weeks. Three Jehovah's Witnesses have been detained for nine years for their faith-based refusal of military service. All the minority churches had been closed down in May 2002 and ordered to register and submit details of members and any foreign funding (which most denied receiving). Currently about 250 church members are detained in harsh conditions, including up to 80 army conscripts.

Dozens of Muslims have also been detained incommunicado since 1995 on suspicion of links with armed Islamist opposition groups.

Long-term detentions and "disappearances": Secret, indefinite and incommunicado detention without charge and without any pretence of legality has been reported since independence. This has become the norm for action against political dissenters or supporters of exile political parties or armed opposition groups. Through the long period of time, it has become clear that many have "disappeared" and are feared to have been extrajudicially executed.

There are also allegations that Ethiopian prisoners of war were secretly executed, such as Colonel Bezabih Petros, an air force pilot paraded on television after being shot down over Asmara during the 1998-2000 Eritrea-Ethiopia war. The Eritrean government recently acknowledged his death to the War Claims Commission at The Hague, but without giving any details of this possible war crime. It had long refused to say anything about his "disappearance".

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>