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Eritrea: Government must end religious persecution

"You will receive no visitors and you will rot here until you sign this paper."

The reported words of an Eritrean military commander to Helen Berhane, a well known gospel singer of the Rema Church who has been detained incommunicado in Mai Serwa military camp since 13 May 2004. She is currently held in a metal shipping container.

Helen Berhane is just one of many people in Eritrea who are locked up because they do not belong to an officially recognised faith. In the last 3 years, at least 26 pastors and priests, some 1750 evangelical church members, and dozens of Muslims have been detained by the government. Many have been tortured and churches have been shut down.

Amnesty International today launches a report documenting 44 incidents of religious persecution since 2003. The report, *Eritrea: Religious Persecution*, shows how there have been increasing violations in Eritrea of the right to freedom of religion, belief and conscience. Some who do not follow the officially recognised religions have been sentenced to prison terms by a secret security committee without any legal representation or right of appeal.

"All those detained for their religious beliefs must be released immediately. The situation is critical and we are extremely concerned for the safety and wellbeing of hundreds of people facing this reality in Eritrea", said Kolawole Olaniyan, Director of Amnesty International's Africa programme.

A torture technique known as "the helicopter" is routinely used as punishment for people who do not belong to an officially recognised faith. It involves someone's hands and feet being tied together behind their back. Prisoners can be left in this position for hours. Many are in extremely poor health and denied adequate medical treatment.

"The requirement for registration of religions in Eritrea should be revised to ensure it does not violate the right to practise a religion. The government must end its violent repression and ensure that international law is upheld," said Kolawole Olaniyan, Director of Amnesty International's Africa programme.

Amnesty International's findings show that the government has increased the violent repression of religious minorities in 2005. The crackdown, that started without any explanation in 2003, is part of a general disregard for human rights by President Issayas Afewerki's government, which has been in power since the country's independence from Ethiopia in 1991.

Background:

The detention of individuals solely because of their religious beliefs is part of the general denial of the right to freedom of expression and association in Eritrea, as well as other grave violations of basic human rights.

In 2002, the government suddenly ordered all unregistered religions to close their places of worship and stop practising their faith until they were registered. Only four main religions were immediately recognised as official faiths; these were the Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran churches and Islam. Since then no minority religious group has succeeded in registering themselves officially.

In the past decade Jehovah's Witnesses have been severely persecuted with a total of 22 currently detained.

For a full copy of the report, *Eritrea: Religious Persecution*, please see:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engaf640132005>

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>

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