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Eritrea: Growing repression of government critics

Amnesty International fears that the recent arrest of 11 former Eritrean government officials and reports of the wholesale closure of the private press indicates growing repression of non-violent dissent by the government of President Issayas Afewerki.

The 11 -- Petros Solomon, Ogbe Abraha, Haile Woldetensae, Mahmud Ahmed Sheriffo, Berhane Ghebre Eghzabiher, Astier Feshatsion, Saleh Kekya, Hamid Himid, Estifanos Seyoum, Germano Nati and Beraki Ghebre Selassie -- were arrested in Asmara on 18 and 19 September 2001. The government has reportedly announced that these 11, who have recently been openly critical of Eritrean government policies, have been detained "because of crimes committed against the nation's security and sovereignty."

The 11 were part of a group of 15 senior officials of the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) party who, in May 2001, wrote an open letter to party members criticizing the government for acting in an "illegal and unconstitutional" manner. The letter also called upon "all PFDJ members and the Eritrean people in general to express their opinion through legal and democratic means and to give their support to the goals and principles they consider just." Some of the group of 15 who were holding ministerial positions at that time were subsequently removed from their posts. One of the group later recanted and the other three are reportedly out of the country. Amnesty International fears that they could be arrested if they returned to Eritrea.

"Those arrested may be prisoners of conscience detained solely for the peaceful expression of their political concerns," Amnesty International said. The whereabouts of the 11 are currently unknown. They have not been given access to their families or lawyers and there are growing fears about their safety.

There are also fears that around 60 of their supporters may have been arrested as well.

"All those who have been arrested should be brought to court promptly, charged with a recognizably criminal offence or released. Any trial should be held in accordance with international human rights standards and without recourse to the death penalty," Amnesty International urged. The organization would be concerned if the detainees were charged and brought to trial before the Special Court, which fails to meet international standards for fair trial. The Court conducts trials behind closed doors and allows no right to defence counsel or of appeal to a higher or independent court.

Amnesty International is also concerned about the ban on the Eritrean private press imposed by the government from 19 September, for "not abiding by the press law". The government has reportedly stated that all independent newspapers have been suspended because they had "put at risk the unity and interest of the country" and that those newspapers that were judged to have abided by the press laws would be allowed to reopen. The independent press has

become more critical of government policies over the last few months and, in particular, some newspapers reported the open letter from the 15 PFDJ members.

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