

PUBLIC

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UA 276/01

Fear for safety

31 October 2001

ERITREA

Yousef Mohamed Ali (m)
Medhanie Haile (m)
Dawit Habtemichael (m)
Amanuel Asrat (m)
Dawit Isaac (m)
Temesken Ghebreyesus (m)
Mattewos Habteab (m)
Aron Berhane (m)
Seyoum Fsehaye (m)

The nine journalists named above have been, according to Amnesty International's information, detained incommunicado at a police station in the capital, Asmara, for over a month. They are not known to have been charged with any offence, or brought to court within 48 hours, as required by law. Conditions in police cells in Eritrea are harsh, and they are at risk of ill-treatment.

They were arrested after 19 September, when the government ordered all independent newspapers to cease publication.

The nine are journalists from the *Keste Debona*, *Seti*, *Mekaleh*, *Tsigenai* and *Zemen* newspapers, and one freelance reporter. They are held at Asmara Police Station Number One, where they have not been allowed to see their families or lawyers.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Earlier this year 15 senior members of the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) party wrote an open letter to party members, which became public in May 2001. In it they criticized the government for acting in an illegal and unconstitutional manner and 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."

Eleven of the 15 were detained on 18 and 19 September and are still held, incommunicado and without charge (See UA 241/01, AFR 64/002/2001, 20 September 2001 and follow-up, AFR 64/004/2001, 26 October).

Some independent newspapers reported the contents of the open letter. On 19 September the government shut down all independent newspapers, saying that they were "not abiding by the press law" and had "put at risk the unity and interest of the country". The government has stated that only those newspapers that are deemed to have abided by the press laws will be allowed to reopen.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- expressing concern that the journalists named above have been detained incommunicado for over a month, and calling on the authorities either to charge them with a recognizably criminal offence or release them;
- urging the authorities to guarantee that none of them will be ill-treated in custody;

- calling on the authorities to allow them immediate access to lawyers of their own choice, their families and adequate medical care;
- expressing concern that independent newspapers have been closed down, and pointing out that this appears to have been done to stifle journalists' right to freedom of expression and to hamper them in their legitimate work.

APPEALS TO:

President Issayas Afewerki
Office of the President
PO Box 257
Asmara, Eritrea

Telegrams: President Issayas Afewerki, Asmara, Eritrea

Faxes: + 291 1 125123

Salutation: Your Excellency

Mrs Fawzia Hashim
Minister of Justice
Ministry of Justice
PO Box 241
Asmara, Eritrea

Telegrams: Justice Minister, Asmara, Eritrea

Faxes: + 291 1 126422

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

Mr Naizghi Kiflu
Minister of Information
Ministry of Information
PO Box 242
Asmara, Eritrea

Telegrams: Information Minister, Asmara, Eritrea

Faxes: + 291 124847

Salutation: Dear Minister

and to diplomatic representatives of Eritrea accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 10 December 2001.