

PUBLIC

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**Incommunicado detention / Prisoners of Conscience /
Ill-treatment**

18 September 2003

ERITREA

57 male and female students - members of minority Christian churches

Fifty-seven young male and female members of minority Christian churches are being held in metal shipping containers at Sawa military camp in western Eritrea. They were arrested in mid-August and are being held incommunicado in harsh conditions, which amount to torture or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

The 57 prisoners of conscience are school students from all over Eritrea who were sent to Sawa Military Camp in western Eritrea for a compulsory 3-month summer course under new pre-National Service education regulations. They were arrested in the camp for possessing bibles in the Tigrinya language (although this is not illegal) and are imprisoned in metal shipping containers. Conditions in the containers, which have no light or ventilation, are said to be extremely hot and suffocating, and they are allegedly being given little food, refused medical care and have to perform bodily functions inside the container. They are being pressurized to sign statements to abandon their religion and re-join the majority Eritrean Orthodox Church. Five others arrested with them were allowed to go free when they signed the statements.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Religious persecution is officially prohibited by the laws and Constitution of Eritrea, and the government professes to respect religious freedom, but hundreds of members of minority Christian churches have been arbitrarily detained and ill-treated during 2003. About 250 are still held incommunicado without charge. This followed a government order in May 2002 for all faith groups other than the four main religions – the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Islam, the Eritrean Evangelical (Lutheran) Church and the Roman Catholic Church – to close down and apply for official registration, including giving details of their membership and any foreign funding.

The government's attack on the minority churches, which are mostly part of an evangelical revival movement in recent years, appears to be part of general repression of the rights to freedom of opinion and belief. These churches, however, have no known political involvement or links with prominent political personalities and journalists currently detained as prisoners of conscience for calling for democratic reforms.

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

- appealing for the immediate and unconditional release of the 57 school students, who are being detained as prisoners of conscience at Sawa Military Camp;
- calling for the authorities to respect the right to religious freedom guaranteed by the Constitution and laws of Eritrea;
- requesting that the students are treated humanely and given immediate access to their families, medical treatment and legal representatives;
- appealing to the authorities to stop the arbitrary arrests, torture and ill-treatment of these members of minority churches arrested for their religious beliefs.

APPEALS TO:

His Excellency Issayas Afewerki
President of the State of Eritrea
Office of the President
P O Box 257
Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 125123
Salutation: Your Excellency

Ms Fawzia Hashim
Minister of Justice
Ministry of Justice
P O Box 241
Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 126422
Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

Acting Commissioner of Police
Ministry of Internal Affairs
P O Box 1223
Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 122135
Salutation: Dear Commissioner

Brigadier General Abraha Kassa
Head of Security
Office of the President
P O Box 257
Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: +2911 125123
Salutation: Dear Brigadier General

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 30 October 2003.