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Eritrea: On 6th anniversary of mass detentions of dissidents, human rights violations continue unabated

A year after Amnesty International called on President Issayas Afewerki to explain the fate of prominent prisoners of conscience, held in secret since 2001 and possibly dead, including some of the president's closest allies in the Eritrean liberation struggle, the Eritrean government remains impervious to human rights enquiries and appeals.

Since the detentions on political grounds six years ago on 18 September 2001 of hundreds of former government leaders, private-media journalists and civil servants, most are still held incommunicado in life-threatening conditions. Several detainees are alleged to have died in prison due to ill-treatment and denial of medical treatment, such as former army chief General Ogba Abraha and journalist Fessahaye "Joshua" Yohannes. Despite numerous requests, the government has constantly refused to provide any evidence that they are still alive.

With no political parties allowed except the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), no independent civil society associations or human rights NGOs and no independent media, there is no freedom of expression and all kinds of dissent are vigorously suppressed. Thousands of young people have fled from military conscription which starts for all at age 18 and continues almost indefinitely. Those who seek to evade it or are caught fleeing the country are harshly punished by torture and indefinite detention.

Religious persecution

In addition to these and other political detentions in violation of constitutional rights to freedom of opinion and association, the constitutional right to freedom of religious belief continues to be violently suppressed. The government simply denies persecution of minority faiths but refuses access to investigations. There are still frequent and widespread arrests of evangelical church members, including children, caught practising their faith in private houses after their churches were closed down in 2002. Religious prisoners have been routinely and repeatedly tortured to try to force them to reject their faith, which most have refused to do.

Over 2,000 men, women and children of evangelical and other minority churches are currently held in prisons throughout the country. Of 25 Jehovah's Witnesses currently detained, three have been held for 13 years.

Four members of banned evangelical churches died in custody as a result of torture and denial of medical treatment on separate occasions in Eritrea in the past year:

- Nigisti Haile (f), aged 33, died in Wia army training camp near the port of Massawa on 5 September 2007, after being arrested with other church members in Keren in early 2006.
- Moges Solomon (m), aged 30, died in Adi-Nefase army camp near the port of Assab on 15 February 2007, after being detained in 2003.
- Amanuel Andegergish (m), aged 23, and Kibrom Fremichael (m), aged 30, died in Adi-Quala military camp on 17 October 2006.

Orthodox Churches worldwide have appealed on behalf of Patriarch (*Abune*) Antonios of the officially-recognized Eritrean Orthodox Church, aged 79. He was deposed in contravention of church procedures in May 2007 and replaced by a pro-government candidate on account of criticising government interference in church affairs. He had previously been held under house arrest for eight months in his official church residence but after deposition was moved to an unknown and secret place of custody. No details of his conditions have been disclosed by the authorities, or whether he is allowed to receive medical treatment

for diabetes and other health problems.

Torture

Torture is routinely used as a punishment by the Eritrean security forces for political, military and religious prisoners. They are held incommunicado without charge or trial in military or security prisons. Virtually no medical treatment is provided for torture injuries or any illness contracted in the harsh conditions in the prisons or metal shipping containers where many detainees are held. The judicial or security authorities have never investigated or prosecuted any case of torture, enforced disappearance or death in custody.

Torture methods include being beaten severely and being tied for long periods in painful positions, which is also commonly used against men and women fleeing conscription or for other military offences.

Refugees

Thousands more Eritreans have fled in the past year to neighbouring countries including Sudan and Ethiopia to seek asylum. Some hundreds reaching Libya in the past year have been detained there. Amnesty International has appealed to the Libyan authorities not to forcibly return them to Eritrea where they would be tortured and detained indefinitely, as with hundreds of Eritreans forcibly returned from Libya in 2004. Eritrean refugees in Sudan have also been detained in recent months, apparently after a rapprochement between the governments of Sudan and Eritrea.

Amnesty International's call to the Government of Eritrea

Amnesty International calls on the Eritrean Government to clarify the fate of the detainees who are feared to have died in custody, through indisputable evidence such as direct access to their families, legal representatives or an appropriate international or regional body.

Amnesty International appeals for the immediate release of all prisoners of conscience imprisoned in Eritrea for their opinions or beliefs; a public declaration against torture; and an opening of dialogue and international access for human rights bodies.