

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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## **Amnesty International condemns Eritrea's appalling anniversary – 11 years of incommunicado arbitrary detention**

Eleven years since the arrest of a group of 11 high-profile politicians and 10 journalists, who have not been charged, tried or seen in public since, Amnesty International repeats its condemnation of their continued arbitrary detention. The organisation also condemns the arbitrary detention of thousands of other prisoners of conscience and political prisoners across Eritrea.

The 11 politicians – former members of the Central Council of the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice party, along with four others, forming a group known as the 'G15', published an open letter to the government and President Isaias Afewerki in September 2001 calling for reform and "democratic dialogue." Whilst three of them fled the country and one abandoned the group, 11 of them were arrested on 18 September 2001 for what the Eritrean Government calls crimes "against the security of the nation."

On that same day, the government announced the closure of the entire privately-owned press, and over the following week 10 leading journalists were also arrested.

Since their arrests, these 21 people have not been charged with any crime and have never been to court. Their families have not been permitted to visit them, and have not even been informed of their whereabouts. Nine of the G15 prisoners are reported to have died in prison. Journalist Dawit Isaak, one of those detained in 2001, was reported to have died in prison during 2011. It was reported in August 2012 that journalists Dawit Habtemichael, Mattewos Habteab and Wedi Itay, also arrested as part of the September 2001 crackdown, had died in the north-eastern prison camp of Eiraeiro.

More than a decade since their arrest, the Eritrean Government refuses to confirm the whereabouts of these prisoners or to confirm reports of the deaths of many of them in detention.

These are not isolated cases. The fate of the politicians and journalists arrested in 2001 is shared by thousands of people in Eritrea. Both before and since the 2001 arrests, thousands of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners have been arbitrarily detained across the country, including other journalists and politicians, religious practitioners, students, and thousands of young people who have tried to avoid indefinite conscription into the country's notorious national service. Thousands of people have been arbitrarily detained for attempting to flee the country.

On the anniversary of 18 September 2001, Amnesty International decries the appalling, widespread use of arbitrary detention across Eritrea, and the shocking fact that countless Eritreans have been detained without charge or trial for well over a decade.

Amnesty International urges the Eritrean government to immediately release all prisoners of conscience in Eritrea. Anyone suspected of a criminal offence must be charged with a recognizable crime and tried promptly before a civilian court in accordance with international fair trial standards, or released immediately and unconditionally. Amnesty International urges

the Eritrean government to ensure that this is the last year in which this symbolic date passes while Eritreans continue to be detained without justice, for exercising their human rights.

Amnesty International welcomes the creation by the United Nations Human Rights Council of a Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Eritrea, and looks forward to the appointment of the mandate holder later this month. The organisation believes that this mandate will contribute to breaking the silence that has so long surrounded the disastrous state of human rights in Eritrea.

Amnesty International encourages the Special Rapporteur to accord particular attention to the thousands of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners in arbitrary detention in Eritrea, as well as to the severe restrictions on freedom of expression and association, restrictions on freedom of religion, conscription into indefinite national service, the use of forced labour, the prevalence of torture and other forms of ill-treatment, and the appalling detention conditions in the country.