

PUBLIC

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11 May 2005

Further Information on UA 73/05 (AFR 64/003/2005, 24 March 2005) Prisoner of conscience/Torture or ill-treatment/Detention without charge

ERITREA **Pastor Kidane Weldu (m), aged in his mid-50s**
 14 members of the Kale Hiwot evangelical church
New name: Demoze Afewerki (m), aged 67, chair of the Gideons (Bible) International
 branch in Eritrea

Demoze Afewerki, 67, married with three children, is now known to have been arrested at the same time as Pastor Kidane Weldu, and is detained without charge, incommunicado, in the same prison. He is head of the inspection department of the Housing and Commerce Bank of Eritrea, and chair of the Gideons (Bible) International branch in Eritrea.

Pastor Kidane Weldu of the Mullu Wongel (Full Gospel) Church, arrested in mid-March 2005, is still detained incommunicado and without charge or trial in the special security section (*Wenjel Mirmira*) of the 2nd police station in the capital, Asmara.

Pastor Kidane Weldu is one of 16 full-time pastors of various evangelical churches currently detained without charge in military, security and police prisons in Eritrea on account of their religious beliefs. Among the detained pastors are Haile Naizgi, Dr Kiflu Gebremeskal and Tesfatsion Hagos (for details see UA 187/04, AFR 64/006/2004, 1 June 2004), and Reverend Doctor Futsum Kuluberhan, Reverend Doctor Tekleab Mengisteab and Reverend Gebremedhin Giorgis (spelling corrected) – members of a revival Sunday School movement (“Medhanie Alem”) of the Eritrean Orthodox Church.

Up to 900 members of these banned churches, worshipping clandestinely, are also detained. Among them are nearly 150 women, including a well-known evangelical singer, Helen Berhane.

They are held in harsh conditions, some of them tortured to try to make them sign a renunciation of their faith, in shipping containers, secret cells or underground prisons. They are detained in a number of military prisons (with over 230 in Sawa military conscription and training centre, near the Sudan border), Mai Serwa army camp near Asmara, and police and security prisons in Asmara, Keren town in the north and the Red Sea port of Assab.

The Eritrean authorities continue to claim that accusations of religious persecution are “groundless”. The director of the President’s Office recently said that “one cannot question the credentials of this country on religious rights and religious tolerance” (quoted by Agence France Presse, 5 April 2005), though saying that “if a sect assembles without permission, its members are maybe arrested for five hours and then let off with a warning.” An Eritrean representative informed the UN Commission on Human Rights in April that the Seventh Day Adventist Church, one of over a dozen minority Christian churches which had been shut down in May 2002, would soon be granted official registration, but none of them has yet been allowed to open.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of Pastor Kidane Weldu of the Mulu Wongel Church, arrested on 13 March in Asmara, 14 members of the Kale Hiwot evangelical church, arrested the same day, and Demoze Afewerki, chair of the Gideons (Bible) International section;
- asking the authorities to ensure that they are not tortured or ill-treated in custody, and are given access to their families, lawyers and any medical attention they may require;
- calling for them to be released immediately and unconditionally, as they are prisoners of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of religion, which is guaranteed in the Eritrean Constitution;
- calling for some 900 other people, including 15 other pastors and some 150 women, who are detained simply on account of their religious beliefs, to be released immediately and unconditionally;
- expressing concern that the prisoners have been arbitrarily detained without charge or trial, contrary to human rights provisions in the Eritrean Constitution and laws which require that arrested persons are brought before a court within 48 hours.

APPEALS TO:

President

His Excellency President Issayas Afewerki

Office of the President

P O Box 257, Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 126422

Salutation: Your Excellency

Ms Fawzia Hashim

Minister of Justice

Ministry of Justice

P O Box 241, Asmara, Eritrea

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

Brigadier Abraham Andom

Commissioner of Police

Ministry of Internal Affairs

P O Box 1223, Asmara, Eritrea

Mr Semere Beyene

Director, Department of Religious Affairs

Ministry of Local Government

P O Box 225, Asmara, Eritrea

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 24 June 2005.