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Eritrea: Prominent journalist reported dead in secret prison

Fessahaye Yohannes (known as "Joshua"), a journalist, playwright, poet, father of three, and long-term prisoner of conscience, is reported to be dead as a result of severe ill-treatment and denial of medical care in a secret prison in northern Eritrea.

Eritrea is a country closed to human rights investigators and while Amnesty International is therefore unable to confirm by direct evidence the reports of his death last month, it has assessed the reports as highly credible.

Since his arrest in 2001 and "disappearance" after a hunger strike while in police custody in Asmara in April in 2002, the Eritrean government has constantly refused to say where "Joshua" was detained and in what conditions, despite intense international campaigning for his release by Amnesty International and media organizations. All have called without success on the Eritrean authorities to explain persistent reports of his death, and also of the deaths of several other political detainees including three other journalists who were held with him. The Eritrean government, defying international concerns, tries to pass off all reports of human rights abuses as fabrications.

Forty-eight-year-old Fessahaye Yohannes, editor of the leading *Setit* newspaper and a former volunteer Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) fighter before independence, had been arrested in September 2001. At that time, former government ministers who were members of the one-party parliament as well as former EPLF leaders were detained and accused of treason. Ten leading independent journalists were also arrested and accused of being "spies and mercenaries", and all private media was shut down indefinitely. Hundreds of other arrests also took place at this time, including of civil servants, former EPLF fighters, business leaders, army conscripts and students. All those arrested were held incommunicado in appalling conditions, without being taken to court or charged with any offence. None had advocated violent opposition. Only a few out of some hundreds have been released, often when they were dying.

The government ministers had criticised President Issayas Afewerki, who had led the EPLF to win Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia in 1991, and demanded democratic reforms guaranteed by the Constitution. They were prisoners of conscience detained on account of the peaceful expression of their opinions. The private media had published articles on the issue and gave the dissidents a platform.

Those detained politicians and journalists considered most threatening to President Issayas Afewerki were later detained in a remote and makeshift building in Embatkala near Dongolo, to the north of the capital of Asmara. Here, they were kept in secret and guarded by a special army unit. These prisoners of conscience, said to number over 60 in all, were occasionally allowed hospital treatment in Asmara under military secrecy. In 2003 they were again apparently moved to a more distant desert prison called Eiraeiro in the Red Sea Region where there are no roads or habitations. Physical conditions there were worse, with no possibility of medical treatment.

Fessahaye Yohannes reportedly died because he was denied medical treatment during a long illness.

Amnesty International urgently calls on the Eritrean President to:

- o establish an impartial and independent judicial inquiry to investigate the reported death of Fessahaye "Joshua" Yohannes and that of other co-detainees who have also allegedly died, and to authorise it to visit the Eiraeiro prison;
- o state publicly what has happened to Fessahaye Yohannes and other detainees;
- o if he is dead, return his body to his family for burial, and bring to justice those responsible for any criminal actions or negligence resulting in his death;
- o if he is still alive, release him immediately and unconditionally, as a prisoner of conscience who has not used or advocated violence.

