

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 64/004/2004 (Public)  
News Service No: 118  
19 May 2004

**Embargo Date: 19 May 2004 01:00 GMT**

## **Eritrea: Government resists scrutiny on human rights and calls to end torture and arbitrary detention**

Since the crackdown two-and-a-half years ago on peaceful dissent and calls for democratic reform, torture, arbitrary detention, "disappearances" and ill-treatment of political prisoners have become entrenched in Eritrea, Amnesty International said today in a new *report, Eritrea: 'You have no right to ask' - Government resists scrutiny on human rights.*

President Issayas Afewerki's one-party government has stopped all dialogue on human rights and rejected any scrutiny of violations. "The government's refusal of openness and accountability about its human rights practices is contrary to human rights safeguards in the Eritrean Constitution and laws, and the international human rights treaties Eritrea has ratified," Amnesty International said.

On the occasion of the 11th anniversary of formal independence on 24 May, Amnesty International is calling on the Government of Eritrea to release all prisoners of conscience, take steps to eradicate the use of torture, bring all prisoners within a proper system of impartial justice and humane treatment in custody, and guarantee the rights to freedom of expression of peaceful opinion and religious belief and the freedom of the press. Amnesty International also calls on the international community to provide full protection for Eritrean refugees.

Prisoners of conscience in Eritrea include former liberation movement leaders who helped to win Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia in 1991. The government has branded former foreign minister Haile Woldetsae and other leading critics arrested in September 2001 as "traitors", supposedly collaborating with Ethiopia during and after the bitter war of 1998-2000. Ten independent journalists were detained too and the entire private press banned - they have been maligned as "mercenaries and spies for Ethiopia", an accusation totally unsubstantiated.

None of these prisoners has been charged with any offence or presented to a court. They have not been seen by their families since then and the authorities refuse to say where they are detained or how they are treated. Thousands of other political detainees are also virtually "disappeared".

Amnesty International was informed that a group of mothers of detainees and the "disappeared" were even told, "You have no right to ask [about them]". Whether criticism of government abuses is about prominent or "unknown" political detainees, religious persecution, punishment-torture of national service conscripts, or detention and torture of returned asylum-seekers (those forcibly returned, for example, by

Malta in late 2003), the government routinely dismisses concerns and criticisms backed by well-documented evidence as "malicious smears" and "misinformation".

In its latest report, the organization presents testimony and sketched illustrations of various methods of torture used on detainees in Eritrea. Prisoners have been tied with ropes for days or weeks non-stop in contorted painful positions. These torture methods have nick-names such as "the helicopter", "Jesus Christ" (a position resembling crucifixion) and "number eight". Prisoners are tortured as the standard punishment for evading or escaping conscription or for a military offence, or while being interrogated about suspected alleged political opposition.

Prisoners are held in atrocious conditions - damp underground cells, overcrowded and sweltering shipping containers, secret security sections of official police stations or prisons, military prisons and make-shift rural prison camps. They have a poor diet, little water for drinking or washing, and virtually no medical treatment for torture injuries or illness.

The increasing flow of refugees from Eritrea includes many torture victims as well as others fleeing compulsory national military service for all men and women between 18 and 40 years (which has been extended indefinitely), religious persecution, repression of peaceful political dissent, as well as suspicion of support for armed opposition groups neighbouring countries.

Religious persecution of minority Christian faiths has escalated in the past two years, particularly against Jehovah's Witnesses (who were stripped of their basic civic rights in 1994) and evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Three Jehovah's Witnesses have been detained incommunicado by the army for the last ten years because of their faith-based refusal of military service. The government does not recognize the right to conscientious objection. Members of other minority churches have been jailed and tortured or ill-treated to make them abandon their faith. They are not allowed to practice their religion during national service and bibles have been burned. Muslims have been targeted too, some held in secret incommunicado detention for years on suspicion of links with an Islamist armed opposition group operating from Sudan.

Amid continuing tensions over the border with Ethiopia and fears of a new war, Amnesty International's report warns of a possible repeat of human rights abuses committed in the previous war by both sides against civilians and prisoners of war.

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