

PUBLIC

AI Index: AFR 64/011/2003

27 November 2003

UA 348/03 Prisoners of conscience/ unlawful detention/fear of torture or ill-treatment

ERITREA **lyob (second name not known), (m), pastor of the *Kale Hiwot* (Word of Life) church, Mendefera
Seven other members of the same church (names unknown)**

A pastor known only as lyob, from the *Kale Hiwot* (Word of Life) evangelical Christian church, and seven unnamed members of his congregation, are reportedly being held incommunicado at a police station in the southern town of Mendefera. They may be tortured or ill-treated in an attempt to force them to abandon their faith.

The eight were arrested by police on 23 November in Mendefera, where their church is based, 30 kilometres south of the capital Asmara. The reason for their arrest is unknown and they have not been charged with any offence. Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience, detained solely for exercising their legitimate right to freedom of belief and expression.

The main *Kale Hiwot* church in Asmara was closed down by soldiers in October, apparently as part of the government's actions to restrict religious freedom.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The *Kale Hiwot* church is one of 12 minority Christian churches which were banned in May 2002 and ordered to register with the new Department of Religious Affairs, but were informally allowed to continue to worship. Churches complained at the registration requirements, which included providing extensive details of members and funds.

In early 2003, the authorities began a pattern of arrests of members of several of these churches, breaking into church services and ceremonies, illegally detaining them for indefinite periods without charge, and subjecting prisoners to torture or ill-treatment to try to force them to abandon their faith. In August 2003, 57 school students on a compulsory course at Sawa military barracks were arrested and put in metal shipping containers in harsh conditions amounting to torture, because they were found with bibles in their possession. Six of them are still being held, in underground cells in solitary confinement (see UA 269/03, AFR 64/006/2003, 18 September 2003 and follow-up). Over 330 members of minority faiths are currently detained in different parts of the country.

The Eritrean authorities have previously claimed there is no religious persecution in Eritrea, saying that the national Constitution guarantees freedom of religion. However, the Constitution's guarantees of freedom of opinion and belief, and freedom from arbitrary detention, are constantly violated with impunity. These minority churches appear to have been targeted in order to restrict independent expression of opinions and beliefs generally, even though the churches have not been involved in supporting calls for democratic reforms which resulted in detentions of prisoners of conscience and the banning of the private press in September 2001. Nor have the churches expressed opposition to compulsory national military service (a major reason behind the flow of refugees from Eritrea), though the right to conscientious objection is not recognized by the Eritrean government.

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

- appealing for the immediate and unconditional release of Pastor Iyob and seven members of his *Kale Hiwot* (Word of Life) church in Mendefera, who were arrested on 23 November, and who are being held incommunicado without charge;
- stating that Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience, imprisoned on account of their religious beliefs;
- calling for guarantees that they are treated humanely in detention, and are not subjected to torture or ill-treatment;
- calling for them to be allowed access to relatives, lawyers and any medical treatment they may require;
- urging the government to respect the guarantees of freedom of religion and of freedom from arbitrary detention contained in the Eritrean Constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which the government ratified in 2002.

APPEALS TO:

His Excellency Issayas Afewerki
President of the State of Eritrea
Office of the President
P O Box 257
Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 125123 (please keep trying)

Salutation: Your Excellency

Ms Fawzia Hashim
Minister of Justice
Ministry of Justice
P O Box 241
Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 126422

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

Brigadier Abraham Andom
Commissioner of Police
Ministry of Internal Affairs
P O Box 1223
Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 122135

Mr Semere Beyene
Director, Department of Religious Affairs
Office of the President
P O Box 257
Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 125 123 (please keep trying)

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 9 January 2003.