

ERITREA Ali Mohamed Saleh (m), aged 63, Ministry of Foreign Affairs official

Ali Mohamed Saleh has not been seen since 4 April, when he left home to go to work in the Eritrean capital, Asmara. It is feared that he has been abducted by the security police and detained in secret, along with many other suspected critics of the government. He is a former leader of one of the armed groups that fought for Eritrean independence, a rival to the organisation that now rules the country. He is a diabetic who takes tablets daily, and carries only a small supply with him. He may be at risk of torture or ill-treatment in custody.

His relatives have made numerous inquiries with the police and hospitals, without success. Dozens of other critics and opponents of the government have recently been arrested or "disappeared".

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Eritrea achieved independence from Ethiopia in 1991, after a 30-year conflict, when the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) defeated the Ethiopian army. A number of rival armed groups had also been fighting for independence, including the Eritrean Liberation Front-Unified Organization (ELF-UO), based in Sudan, for which Ali Mohamed Saleh was a foreign representative.

The EPLF set up a provisional government, and allowed its former rivals to enter the country freely if they renounced their opposition. Ali Mohamed Saleh returned to Eritrea in 1991 and the ELF-UO was disbanded. He has since then been working in the Arabic department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Asmara and at the embassies in the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

The EPLF-based government remains in power, though the EPLF has been transformed into the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PDFJ). In May 2001, 15 prominent PDFJ members published an open letter criticising President Issayas Afewerki and his government, calling for democratic and human rights reforms. Among those who signed the letter (known as the "Group of 15" or G15) were several former government ministers, including a former Vice-President.

Eleven of the G15 were arrested in September 2001, and have been detained ever since, incommunicado and in secret, and without charge or trial. The President has publicly accused them of treason, which carries the death penalty.

The government also shut down all the country's independent newspapers, and detained 10 editors and journalists who had published interviews with the G15 and supported their opinions. The journalists went on hunger strike in March in protest at being detained without charge or trial. They were taken from their cells, and their whereabouts are now unknown. Amnesty International considers them prisoners of conscience. (See UA 107/02, AI Index: AFR 64/002/2002, 8 April 2002).

Since then, dozens more critics or suspected critics of the government have been arrested on suspicion of supporting the G15 or having connections to them. Their families have not been allowed to see them or been told where they are held, and most of these arrests have not been officially acknowledged or their names disclosed. By law anyone arrested should be brought before a court within 48 hours, but none of these detainees has been brought before a court.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of Ali Mohamed Saleh, who "disappeared" on 4 April, and urging the government to acknowledge whether he has been arrested, and guarantee that, if so, he will be humanely treated and allowed medical treatment for his diabetes;
- pointing out that, if he is in custody, he would appear to be a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for his non-violent opposition to the government, who should be released immediately and unconditionally;
- urging the government to ensure that anyone who is detained is brought before a court within 48 hours, in accordance with the Constitution, and either charged with a recognizably criminal offence and given a prompt and fair trial according to international standards, or released;
- calling for all prisoners to be held in officially designated places of custody and given immediate and regular access to their families and legal representatives, and allowed access also to humanitarian organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross.

APPEALS TO:

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

Salutation: Your Excellency
Fax:+ 2911 125123

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

Salutation: Dear Minister
Fax:+ 2911 126422

COPIES TO:

Brigadier General Mussa Raba'a
Commissioner of Police
Ministry of Internal Affairs
P O Box 1223
Asmara, Eritrea

Salutation: Dear Commissioner
Fax:+ 2911 122135

Mr Al-Amin Said Abdallah
Minister of Foreign Affairs
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
P O Box 190
Asmara, Eritrea

Salutation: Dear Minister
Fax:+2911 123788

Brigadier General Abraha Kassa
Head of Security
Office of the President
P O Box 257

Asmara, Eritrea

Salutation: Dear Brigadier General

Fax:+2911 125123

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 3 June 2002.