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Eritrea: Human rights appeal for 10th independence anniversary

As Eritrea celebrates 10 years of independence on 24 May 2003, Amnesty International is appealing to President Issayas Afewerki to release all prisoners of conscience in the country, including 11 members of parliament and 10 independent journalists who have been detained without charge or trial, incommunicado and in secret locations, since September 2001.

The 11 detained members of parliament, who had been calling for democratic reforms, have been labelled "traitors" by the government. They include former Vice-President Mahmoud Ahmed Sheriffo and former Foreign Ministers Haile Woldetensae and Petros Solomon. All eleven were leaders of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which won Eritrea's independence, and of its successor, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), the sole and ruling party.

The government has also called the 10 detained journalists "mercenaries and spies". They had published articles and interviews by the reformists which were critical of the President.

Other prisoners of conscience are members of the Jehovah's Witnesses sect, whose adherents were stripped of their civil rights in 1994, mainly because the sect opposes military service. Four of them who refused conscription have been detained by the army without charge or trial for the past eight years. Five others are the last to remain in custody of hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses rounded up in Asmara in April 2003. Their arrests followed those in February and March 2003 of members of other minority Christian sects, such as the Mulu Wengel (Full Gospel) church, Kale Hiwot (Word of Life) church and others. These prisoners were provisionally released on bond, without any charge so far. Beatings and ill-treatment of church members were alleged. Dozens of church members in Eritrea's conscript army are also allegedly detained.

A further 300 or more prisoners of conscience arrested since September 2001 include Eritrean diplomats, civil servants, businesspeople, journalists from the state media as well as the banned private press, army and security personnel including former EPLF fighters, two local employees of the US embassy, Eritreans forcibly returned from Malta in September 2002, and a recently visiting Eritrean with Swedish citizenship.

Amnesty International believes these prisoners were jailed on account of their non-violent opinions and criticisms of the government or, in some cases, their opposition to military conscription. None has been brought before a magistrate, although the Constitution and laws require this within 48 hours. None has been charged with any offence. Their detention is unlawful, but no lawyer or judge dares

to challenge this. All are held incommunicado and in secret. The authorities have not even acknowledged most of the detentions, let alone given the reasons for them. This has inevitably given rise to fears of their families for their health and safety.

Of those detained since September 2001, only a handful have been freed - such as Roma Gebremichael, the wife of detainee Haile Woldetensae. A former ambassador to China, Ermias Debessai, who was arrested in 1997 and jailed for 7 years for alleged embezzlement in a secret trial by the Special Court without the right to defence representation or appeal, has also recently been released.

In addition, hundreds of suspected political opponents of the government have been arbitrarily detained for many years. Some have "disappeared", feared killed. Most have been detained for their alleged membership of exile political groups such as Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) factions which were Sudan-based armed rivals of the EPLF during the independence struggle and with whom there has been no reconciliation. Prisoners are held in secret security prisons throughout the country. An Ethiopian prisoner of war captured in 1998, airforce colonel Bezabih Petros, is also among the "disappeared".

"Amnesty International calls on President Afewerki to release all prisoners of conscience without condition. All other political prisoners should be brought before a judge and either charged with a recognised criminal offence or released. The Eritrean government should fully respect the rights of all detainees to fair trial, especially the right to legal representation and appeal. Prisoners should be allowed access to their families, legal representatives and medical doctors of their choice" Amnesty International urged.

Amnesty International is also calling for the recognition of the right to conscientious objection to military service, and for an end to all torture or ill-treatment of prisoners, including the military punishment known as "the helicopter". In this form of torture used against deserters, conscription evaders and army offenders, victims are tied up, with hands and feet bound behind their backs, and left face-down in the sun for hours.

Background

The State of Eritrea has been de facto independent from Ethiopia since 1991, when Issayas Afewerki's EPLF, after a 30-year independence struggle, defeated Ethiopian dictator Mengistu Hailemariam's forces in Eritrea, which had been responsible for a pattern of brutal repression, war crimes and crimes against humanity. A UN referendum on independence in 1993 led to internationally-recognised independence, supported by Ethiopia's new government.

In 1998 increasing political and economic tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia led to a two-year border war. The war brought tens of thousands of military casualties and harsh treatment of each country's respective Eritrean and Ethiopian minority communities, including mass forced expulsions. Border tensions remain, but a United Nations military mission is still in place. Conscription of men and women between the ages of 18 and 40 continues in Eritrea, officially for 18 months but mostly extended indefinitely. Conscription and political repression are the main root causes of flight of Eritrean refugees.

Eritrea has been badly hit by drought affecting over half of its 3.6 million population. The government faces armed opposition announced in April 2003 by the Eritrean National Alliance (ENA), based in Ethiopia and Sudan. Other new exile parties supporting the jailed dissidents advocate democratic change by peaceful means. On its side, the Eritrean government supports Ethiopian armed opposition groups. The risk of increased armed conflict in the area threatens to disrupt development and delay reconciliation and peace-making in the Horn of Africa.

For further information on AI's human rights concerns in Eritrea, see Eritrea: Arbitrary detention of government critics and journalists, September 2002, AI Index: AFR 64/008/2002.

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