

PUBLIC

AI Index: AFR 64/003/2005

24 March 2005

UA 73/05 Prisoner of conscience/Torture or ill-treatment/Detention without charge

**ERITREA Pastor Kidane Weldu (m), aged in his mid-50s
14 members of the Kale Hiwot evangelical church**

Kidane Weldu, a pastor of the Mulu Wengel ("Full Gospel") evangelical church, was arrested in a central street in the capital, Asmara, on 13 March. He is married with four children. He is held incommunicado in the 2nd police station in Asmara and is at risk of torture. Amnesty International considers him a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of religion.

Several senior members of the same church have been detained without charge or trial since April 2004.

On the day that Pastor Kidane Weldu was arrested, 16 members of the Kale Hiwot ("Word of Life") evangelical church in a small town near Asmara were arrested, reportedly for watching a Christian video in a church member's home. Although they were not charged or brought to court, two elderly women among them were freed after apparently admitting some offence to the security police and paying a "fine" equivalent to US\$12. The others are still in custody. A total of 120 members of this church are believed to be currently detained

None of the detainees has been brought before a court, although by law this should have been done within 48 hours of their arrest.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Religious persecution is a feature of life in Eritrea, despite government claims to the contrary. There are frequent reports of evangelical church members being tortured by the security forces in an attempt to force them to abandon their faith. Arrests have intensified recently of those defying a 2002 ban on evangelical churches outside the permitted Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran Christian churches. At least 400 members of minority churches are currently detained incommunicado and illegally by the military or the security police. Many are held in Mai Serwa army camp near Asmara in overcrowded metal shipping containers, which have no sanitation and are very hot in the daytime and cold at night. Hundreds of military conscripts are also reportedly detained incommunicado by the army, for refusing to renounce their religious beliefs.

Three Jehovah's Witnesses have been detained incommunicado in Sawa military training centre for over 10 years, longer than any other prisoners of conscience in Eritrea. Three church leaders have been detained in the 2nd police station in Asmara since May 2004: Pastor Haile Naizgi of the Full Gospel Church, Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel, chair of the Eritrean Evangelical Alliance, and Pastor Tesfatsion Hagos of the Rema Church (see UA 187/04, AFR 64/006/2004, 1 June 2004). Helen Berhane, a well-known evangelical religious singer, has been held at Mai Serwa prison since May 2004. Sixty other members of the Rema church, including children and some 35 women, were arrested on 31 December 2004.

Most of those arrested have been members of evangelical churches but three members of a "renewal" movement within the officially-permitted Eritrean Orthodox Church were detained in November 2004: psychiatrist Futsum Gebrenegus, doctor Tekleab, and a priest, *Aba* (father) Gebremedhin. Some 25 Catholics were also reportedly arrested at a wedding rehearsal in January 2005.

Arrests increased in February 2005. On 3 February, Semere Zaid, Professor of Agriculture at the University of Asmara, was arrested and accused of belonging to the Kidane Mehret evangelical church; he was reportedly released in mid-March. On 4 February, 14 members of the Kale Hiwot church were arrested in

Adi-Tekelzan town, 30 km north of Asmara. On 12 February, 15 Christian women were jailed in Keren town, 60km north of Asmara. On 19 February, over 100 children aged between two and 18 were arrested at a Medhane Alem Fellowship (Orthodox Church) Sunday school meeting in Asmara. The younger children were released the same day, and all the other children have now been released.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of Pastor Kidane Weldu of the Mulu Wongel Church, arrested on 13 March in Asmara, and 14 members of the Kale Hiwot evangelical church, arrested the same day;
- asking the authorities to ensure that they are not tortured or ill-treated in custody, and are given access to their families, lawyers and any medical attention they may require;
- calling for them to be released immediately and unconditionally, as they are prisoners of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of religion, which is guaranteed in the Eritrean Constitution;
- calling for the hundreds of others detained simply on account of their religious beliefs to be released immediately and unconditionally;
- expressing concern that the prisoners have been arbitrarily detained without charge or trial, contrary to human rights provisions in the Eritrea Constitution and laws which require that arrested persons are brought before a court within 48 hours.

APPEALS TO:

President

His Excellency President Issayas Afewerki

Office of the President

P O Box 257, Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 126422

Salutation: Your Excellency

Ms Fawzia Hashim

Minister of Justice

Ministry of Justice

P O Box 241, Asmara, Eritrea

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

Brigadier Abraham Andom

Commissioner of Police

Ministry of Internal Affairs

P O Box 1223, Asmara, Eritrea

Mr Semere Beyene

Director, Department of Religious Affairs

Ministry of Local Government

P O Box 225, Asmara, Eritrea

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 5 May 2005.