

PUBLIC

AI Index: AFR 64/004/2007

18 May 2007

UA 119/07 Prisoners of Conscience/Fear of Torture or ill-treatment/incommunicado detention

ERITREA **Zecharias Abraham (m), priest
Mikias Mekonnen (m), church elder
78 churchgoers, including a number of Indian nationals**

Zecharias Abraham, the pastor of a Presbyterian church in the capital, Asmara, Mikias Mekonnen, a church elder and 78 churchgoers, are held incommunicado at an unknown location, and are at risk of torture or ill-treatment. Amnesty International believes them to be prisoners of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their religious beliefs.

Police raided a service at the Mehrete Yesus Evangelical Presbyterian Church and arrested those named above during a church service on 29 April. Amongst those arrested were a man and woman from the USA and a number of school teachers from India. The two US nationals were released on 3 May, but the remainder of the group are still being detained incommunicado and their whereabouts are unknown.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In 2002, the government of Eritrea ordered all unregistered religions to close their places of worship until they were registered. Only Islam and the Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran Christian churches have been officially recognized since May 2002. Members of evangelical churches - including the Presbyterian Church - have been subjected to arrest, torture and coercion by the security forces to try and force them to deny their faith. Reports indicate that there are more than 2,000 evangelical Christians currently being detained incommunicado, without charge or access to legal redress. Many of them are held in remote army camps. Those detained include 68 members of different evangelical churches who were arrested during three operations carried out by the police and military authorities in early January 2007.

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

- calling for Zecharias Abraham, Mikias Mekonnen, and 78 churchgoers from the Mehrete Yesus Presbyterian church in Asmara to be released immediately and unconditionally, as they are prisoners of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of religion, which is guaranteed in the Eritrean Constitution;
- asking the authorities to ensure that none of those detained are tortured or ill-treated, and for the detainees to be given immediate access to their families, lawyers and any medical attention they may require;
- expressing concern that the Presbyterian Church members have been arbitrarily detained without charge or trial, contrary to human rights provisions in the Eritrean Constitution and laws, which require that people are brought before a court within 48 hours of their arrest.

APPEALS TO:

President

His Excellency President Issayas Afewerki

Office of the President

P O Box 257, Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 123 788 (via Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

Salutation: Your Excellency

Ms Fawzia Hashim

Minister of Justice

Ministry of Justice
P O Box 241, Asmara, Eritrea
Fax: +2911 126 422
Salutation: Dear Minister

Commissioner of Police
Ministry of Internal Affairs
P O Box 1223, Asmara, Eritrea
Salutation: Dear Commissioner ??

COPIES TO:

Mr Semere Beyene
Director, Department of Religious Affairs
Ministry of Local Government
P O Box 225, Asmara, Eritrea
Fax: +2911 120 014

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 29 June 2007.