

PUBLIC

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UA 272/03

Prisoners of Conscience / Ill-treatment

19 September 2003

ERITREA

Twelve members of the Eritrean Bethel Church

On 7 September, twelve members of the Eritrean Bethel Church were arrested at a prayer meeting in a house in the capital Asmara. They are reportedly held at the 5th police station, where they are at risk of ill-treatment and beatings. They are prisoners of conscience imprisoned on account of their religious beliefs.

The arrests follow the targeting of members of minority Christian churches in what appears to be part of a general repression of the right to freedom of opinion and belief. In May 2002, the government ordered minority churches to close down and register with a new Department of Religious Affairs. None of the minority churches have yet been officially registered. Between February and May 2003, hundreds of members of more than twelve evangelical churches were arrested. They were tortured and ill-treated in order to force them to sign statements abandoning their faith. The members were also told that their prayer meetings and church gatherings were illegal. They were held without charge or trial, in contrary to the human rights protections (which also guarantee religious freedom), under the laws and Constitution of Eritrea.

About 250 members of minority churches are currently detained as prisoners of conscience, including 57 male and female students who are being held in metal shipping containers at Sawa military camp in western Eritrea. They were arrested for possessing bibles whilst attending a compulsory summer school, where national service conscripts are also trained (see UA 269/03, AFR 64/006/2003, 18 September 2003).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Previously only followers of the Jehovah's Witness religion with approximately 1600 members, had been targeted on account of their faith-based refusal of military service. Three members - Paulos Eyassu, Negede Teklemariam and Isaac Moges have been detained without charge or trial in Sawa military camp since 1994, for refusing military service which is compulsory for all men and women aged between eighteen and forty. Eleven other Jehovah's Witnesses are currently detained on the same grounds and are feared to be subject to ill-treatment (see *The Wire*; August 2003 Vol 33 No. 07; NWS 21, 007, 2003). The usual military punishment for conscription evaders and deserters is torture and prolonged arbitrary incommunicado detention in metal containers or secret prisons.

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 the twelve members of the Eritrean Bethel Church, who are being detained as prisoners of conscience at the 5th police station in the capital Asmara;
- requesting that the twelve are treated humanely and given immediate access to their families, medical treatment and legal representatives;
- calling for the authorities to respect the right to religious freedom guaranteed by the Constitution and laws of Eritrea;
- appealing to the authorities to stop the arbitrary arrests, torture and ill-treatment of members of minority churches arrested for their religious beliefs.

APPEALS TO:

Acting Commissioner of Police
Ministry of Internal Affairs
P O Box 1223

Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 122135

Salutation: Dear Commissioner

Mr Semere Beyene

Director, Department of Religious Affairs

Office of the President

P O Box 257

Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: +2911 125 123

Salutation: Dear Sir

COPIES TO:

Ms Fawzia Hashim

Minister of Justice

Ministry of Justice

P O Box 241

Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 126422

Salutation: Dear Minister

Brigadier General Abraha Kassa

Head of Security

Office of the President

P O Box 257

Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: +2911 125123

Salutation: Dear Brigadier General

His Excellency Issayas Afewerki

President of the State of Eritrea

Office of the President

P O Box 257

Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 125123

Salutation: Your Excellency

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 31 October 2003.