

PUBLIC

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UA 301/04 Fear of torture / Incommunicado detention / Arbitrary killings

ERITREA Thousands of people held at Adi Abeto army prison

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Thousands of people arrested on suspicion of evading military conscription and held at Adi Abeto army prison are thought to be at serious risk of torture and ill-treatment. At least a dozen prisoners have reportedly been shot dead and many more were wounded following a disturbance at the prison.

On 4 November Eritrean security forces in the capital, Asmara, indiscriminately arrested thousands of youths and others suspected of evading military conscription. The arrests took place in the streets, shops and offices, at roadblocks and in homes.

Those arrested were taken to Adi Abeto army prison just outside Asmara. Conditions in this military holding centre are harsh, with severe overcrowding, little food or sanitation. Many detainees have reportedly been forced to sleep outside in the very cold weather without blankets or shoes. Prisoners have no access either to their families or to lawyers.

Towards midnight on 4 November, a prison wall was apparently pushed over by some prisoners, possibly in an escape attempt. Soldiers opened fire and shot dead a number of the prisoners, wounding many more. On 8 November, the Minister of Information said that two prisoners had been killed. Other sources claim at least a dozen people were killed, and that bodies were buried without being returned to their families. Those wounded were taken to hospital and held incommunicado under military guard.

## BACKGROUND

National service for 18 months, including six months' military service, is compulsory in Eritrea for men and women aged 18 to 40 years. Since the war with Ethiopia in 1998-2000, national service has become full military service and has been extended indefinitely. Those who completed national service and pre-independence fighters are subject to recall and reserve duties. There is no exemption for conscientious objectors.

Many young people have tried to evade military service and thousands have fled the country or deserted after being conscripted. The usual punishment for evading or escaping from military service is torture, by beatings and being tied in painful contorted positions for days, and indefinite detention without charge or trial. Hundreds of Eritreans who fled the country were forcibly returned by Malta in 2002 and by Libya in July 2004. They were arrested on arrival back in Eritrea, reportedly tortured and sent to a secret prison on the main Dahlak island, where most are still detained incommunicado.

The UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials state that firearms should only be used against escaping prisoners "if other means remain ineffective" (article 4) and that officials shall exercise restraint and "minimize damage and injury, and respect and preserve human life" (article 5(b)).

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

- expressing concern for the safety of those arrested in a mass round-up of suspected conscription evaders in Asmara on 4 November, and who are held at Adi Abeto military prison;

- urging that prisoners are not subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment;
- appealing for those still detained to be either released without delay or else formally charged with a recognizable criminal offence and given a fair and early trial;
- calling for all those detained to be given adequate shelter and food, with access provided to family members, lawyers and medical assistance;
- asking for an independent judicial inquiry to investigate the killings of prisoners on the night of 4 November,
- calling for the Eritrean government to fulfil its obligations under international law by bringing to justice any official responsible for the arbitrary or abusive use of firearms against prisoners.

**APPEALS TO:**

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

**Fax:** +2911 126422  
**Salutation:** Your Excellency

General Sebhat Ephrem  
Minister of Defence  
Ministry of Defence  
PO Box 629  
Asmara, Eritrea

**Fax:** +2911 124920  
**Salutation:** Dear Minister

**COPIES TO:**

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

**Fax:** + 2911 126995  
**Salutation:** Dear Minister

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 21 December 2004.