

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 64/010/2002 (Public)
News Service No: 158

Embargo Date: 18 September 2002 00:01 GMT

Eritrea: Government critics and journalists held in incommunicado detention

Published

Amnesty International today called on the Eritrean authorities to immediately and unconditionally end the unlawful detention of dozens of prisoners of conscience and human rights defenders, as it released a new report *Eritrea: Arbitrary detentions of government critics and journalists*.

"These arbitrary detentions place Eritrea in contravention of international and regional human rights treaties which the government has only recently ratified. They also foster a climate of impunity on the part of authorities," Amnesty International said.

Critics of the government and journalists from the private press have been held in secret incommunicado detention for one year now, since the authorities started a sudden clampdown on growing public dissent in September 2001.

In May 2001 a dissident group of 15 senior ruling party members (the "Group of 15") publicly criticised President Issayas Afewerki and called for *"the rule of law and for justice, through peaceful and legal ways and means."*

Their letter to party members followed the publication in October 2000 of the "Berlin Manifesto" in which Eritrean academics and professionals abroad claimed the government had *"lagged behind in the development of democratic institutions, including mechanisms for ensuring accountability and transparency."* They cited the *"absence of freedom of expression which has prevented the citizens from exercising their rightful duties of restraining the undue accumulation of power in the presidency."*

In response to the growing criticism and opposition to the President and his ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) party, security forces detained 11 members of the "Group of 15" in Asmara 18 September 2001. Three members who were out of the country at the time escaped arrest and one withdrew his support for the group.

The government claimed the 11 "had committed crimes against the sovereignty, security and peace of the nation." They include former Vice president Mahmoud Ahmed Sheriffo, former Foreign

Minister Haile Woldetensae, Aster Fissehatsion a prominent EPLF leader and others prominent in obtaining independence in 1991 after a 30-year liberation struggle against Ethiopian rule.

Amnesty International has carefully examined the government's allegations that members of the "Group of 15" committed treason during the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia, and concluded that the detainees are prisoners of conscience arrested solely for their peaceful criticism of the government.

On 18 September 2001, the same day they were arrested, the government shut down all privately-owned newspapers and announced that a parliamentary committee would examine conditions under which they would be permitted to re-open. The newspapers were accused of contravening the 1996 Press Law, but their alleged offences were not specified.

In the days following the clampdown, 10 leading journalists were arrested by the police in Asmara. They had protested in writing to the Minister of Information at the arrest of members of the Group of 15 and at the closure of the newspapers. When they went on hunger strike in March they were taken away from the 1st police station and have not been seen since.

Amnesty International considers these detained journalists as prisoners of conscience, imprisoned because of their legitimate professional work as journalists. "As human rights defenders, they placed themselves at risk of government reprisal by publishing articles about human rights and democracy and by asserting the right to freedom of expression and publication," the organization said.

Amnesty International is concerned that the detained journalists and members of the Group of 15 could be held indefinitely without charge or trial, or unfairly tried. "Being held incommunicado, with no contact with their families or lawyers, and in secret, places them at risk of ill-treatment, including denial of medical care," the organization stressed.

In the months following the arrests and through 2002, Amnesty International has received reports of dozens of other detentions, believed to be still continuing, including civil servants, businesspeople, journalists, former liberation fighters, and elders who had sought to mediate between the government and its critics. Hundreds have fled the country, including youths refusing military conscription round-ups.

One detainee, student leader Semere Kesete, recently escaped and told of being held secretly in solitary confinement in a small dark cell in the 6th police station in Asmara. He said other political detainees held there included one former liberation movement leader held since 1992.

None of those detained has been taken to court or charged with any recognised offence. They have been denied all access to the outside world. The government has not provided the families of the detainees with formal notification of the detentions or the detainees' whereabouts or conditions.

"We have made several urgent appeals to Eritrean authorities about these prisoners, without receiving any satisfactory response. The government has refused to allow an Amnesty International delegation to visit Eritrea and discuss its concerns directly with the authorities," the organization said.

Amnesty International is calling on the Government of Eritrea to immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience. The release should include other political prisoners if they are not to be promptly charged, and fairly tried in accordance with international standards for fair trial.

Furthermore, Eritrean authorities should:

publicly commit themselves to recognize and uphold the rights to freedom of expression, opinion and belief, including the rights of political association and of freedom of the press;

end the practice of secret incommunicado detention, which in some cases may amount to "disappearance"; and

ensure that international standards of fair trial are incorporated into national laws and implemented throughout the process of the administration of justice and the judicial system.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>