

PUBLIC

AI Index: AFR 64/010/2005

20 July 2005

UA 189/05 **Fear of torture or ill-treatment / prisoners of conscience**

ERITREA **Semere Zaid (m), university lecturer, aged in his mid-thirties
18 college students**

Semere Zaid, a lecturer in agriculture at the University of Asmara, and 18 students at Halhale College, part of the University of Asmara, are reportedly being detained incommunicado and are at risk of torture or ill-treatment. Amnesty International believes them to be prisoners of conscience, detained solely because of their religious beliefs.

Semere Zaid was detained on 6 July. He had been detained for a month in February 2005 and warned to stop his religious activities. He had to report regularly to a police station in Asmara following his release. He was rearrested during one of these routine visits. He is reportedly detained in a special security service section of the Second Police Station in the capital Asmara, known as "karchele."

On 8 July, 18 students from Halhale College were arrested immediately after their final examinations. They were reportedly arrested individually on account of their membership of evangelical churches. It is not yet known where they are detained.

None of those detained have been charged with any offence. They are being held illegally, as they have not been brought before a court within 48 hours of their detention, as is required by the Eritrean Constitution and laws. Others who have previously been detained on account of their religious beliefs have been tortured in order to force them, as a condition of release, to sign a special document promising to stop their religious activities. Many church members have refused to sign such a document.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Religious persecution against members of minority Christian churches continues intensively in Eritrea, even though the right to freedom of religion is guaranteed in the country's Constitution. On 24 June, 50 girls and 30 boys attending the Asmara Comprehensive School end-of-year party in a public park were arrested. They were all released without charge after a week in detention. Some were children. Some 70 members of the Meseret Christos church who were arrested at a wedding party in Asmara on 28 May are still detained without charge or trial (see UA 151/05, AFR 64/008/2005, 3 June 2005 and follow-up).

Several hundred members of minority churches in Eritrea, including 17 pastors, are currently detained. Since 2002, only the official Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran Christian churches have been allowed to operate, and evangelical churches have been banned. There have been frequent reports of the security forces torturing detained evangelical church members, who have continued worshipping despite the ban, in an attempt to force them to abandon their faith. The detainees are held incommunicado in harsh conditions. They are imprisoned in secret detention centres and army camps in different parts of the country, including the main military training centre at Sawa. Some are held in shipping containers and underground prisons. Several have become seriously ill through denial of medical treatment.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of university lecturer Semere Zaid and 18 students at Halhale College, who were arrested in early July 2005 on account of their religious beliefs;

- calling for them 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 they are not tortured or ill-treated in custody, and are given immediate access to their families, lawyers and any medical attention they may require;
- expressing concern that they 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 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 31 August 2005.