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Eritrea: Over 500 parents of conscripts arrested

Resorting to collective punishment, the Eritrean government has arrested over 500 relatives, mostly parents, of young men and women who have either deserted the army or avoided conscription. Amnesty International strongly condemns these arbitrary detentions. The organisation calls upon the Eritrean authorities to either immediately release the individuals or charge them with recognisable criminal offences and try them within a reasonable time in full accordance with international standards for a fair trial.

The arrests have taken place in the region of Asmara, the capital city, in a sweep that started on 6 December. None of those arrested has been charged with a criminal offence or taken to court within the 48 hours stipulated by the Constitution and laws of Eritrea. The authorities have stated that the detainees must either produce the missing conscripts or pay a fine of 50,000 nafka (approximately US\$1,200). Relatives who fail to do so will be forced to serve six months in the army in place of their missing family member.

The principle of individual penal responsibility, that no one may be penalized for an act for which they are not personally liable, is a fundamental principle of law which is reflected throughout international human rights law. These arrests violate this principle, and specifically the right to liberty and security of the person and the right not to be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention contained in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, to which Eritrea is a party.

The arrests reflect an upsurge in the Eritrean government's use of arbitrary and punitive sanctions against civil society, religious groups and human rights defenders.

Nine journalists from the state-owned media were arrested in November and eight are still detained in a police-run complex in Asmara. In October, over 150 members of evangelical churches were arrested – bringing to over 2,000 the number of people imprisoned in Eritrea as a result of their religious beliefs. All those arrested are being held in incommunicado detention without charge or trial. Amnesty International considers these individuals to be prisoners of conscience, imprisoned solely for peacefully carrying out their work and expressing their beliefs. This widespread state repression further violates Eritrea's treaty obligations under the ICCPR and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights to respect the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and the right to freedom of expression.

Background

Thousands of young men and women have fled Eritrea and sought asylum in Sudan and other countries since Eritrea's war with Ethiopia between 1998 and 2000, in an effort to avoid conscription or after deserting the army. National service, compulsory for all men and women aged between 18 and 40, has been extended indefinitely from the original 18 month term instituted in 1994. It consists of military service and labour on army-related construction projects. The right to conscientious objection to military service is not recognized by the Eritrean authorities. There are frequent round-ups to catch evaders and deserters. Indefinite arbitrary detention and torture or other ill-treatment are regularly used as punishments for evasion, desertion and other military offences.

International humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have faced increasing difficulties in carrying out their activities as a result of measures taken by the authorities. In 2006 alone, eleven organisations have been expelled from Eritrea and forced to cease their work there.

