

PUBLIC

AI Index: AFR 64/002/2004

UA 101/04 Prisoners of Conscience / Torture or ill-treatment

09 March 2004

**ERITREA Pastor Mengist Tewelde-Medhin (m);
and 55 members of the Hallelujah Pentecostal Christian church**

Police and security officers arrested Pastor Mengist Tewelde-Medhin, and 55 women, children and men from the Hallelujah Pentecostal Christian church in the capital Asmara on 12 February. They were arrested at a religious service in a private home and most are still being held incommunicado, without charge or trial, in police stations or army camps. They are allegedly being ill-treated or tortured in order to force them to abandon their faith.

The head of church, Pastor Mengist Tewelde-Medhin, is reportedly being held at Adi Abeto military prison near Asmara, in harsh conditions. Like other members of the church, he is said to be under pressure to abandon his religion. Amnesty International considers all the detained members of the Hallelujah Pentecostal Christian church to be prisoners of conscience, who are being imprisoned for practicing their religion. There are also concerns for their safety as those held in military custody are at risk of torture, which often includes the "helicopter" method of being tied in a contorted position in the open air for a week or more, almost 24 hours a day.

Following their arrest, about 18 church members were taken to Mai Serwa military prison and punished for evading national service, which is compulsory for all males and females aged over 18. They are reportedly locked up in metal shipping containers, where conditions are said to be suffocating and in which temperatures range from zero degrees at night to 28 degrees in the day.

Amnesty International is also deeply concerned about the unlawful detention and ill-treatment of children in military or non-juvenile police custody, contrary to the international and regional child conventions to which Eritrea is a party– the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

Twenty-five girls and boys were arrested and taken to the main Sawa military training centre, where they were locked up in a shipping container and forced to do farm work. Younger children were arrested and held unlawfully in police custody for several days until their parents were finally allowed to take them home after being made to sign a statement declaring they would no longer practice their religion. Older men and women were detained in police stations without charge or trial and also coerced into abandoning their faith. Some were subsequently released when they signed a statement in which they promised not to worship again.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Persecution on the grounds of religion has intensified in Eritrea since the closure of "minority" Christian churches in May 2002. There have been arrests in the past year of hundreds of "home worshippers" or military conscripts found with bibles. No official explanation has been given for the crackdown on the minority churches, which has not affected the officially-recognized Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran churches. The crackdown appears to be partly related to official action against young people trying to evade military service and against parents accused of assisting them to hide or flee the country. The dozen or more minority churches are not linked to the political dissidents in prison, and only the Jehovah's Witnesses oppose military service as a matter of religious principle.

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 all the imprisoned men, women and children from the Hallelujah Pentecostal Christian church in Asmara, who are prisoners of conscience imprisoned on

account of their religious beliefs, and contrary to the guarantees in the Eritrean Constitution of freedom of religious belief and practice;

- expressing deep concern at the detention and ill-treatment of children, contrary to recognised principles of child protection and juvenile justice, and in violation of Eritrea's signing of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child;

- expressing concern that the prisoners are arbitrarily detained without charge or trial, contrary to human rights provisions in the Constitution;

- calling for an immediate impartial investigation into the reports of ill-treatment of adults and children in police or military custody, and the unlawful and routine use of metal shipping containers as prisons.

APPEALS TO:

His Excellency Issayas Afewerki

President of the State of Eritrea

Office of the President

P O Box 257

Asmara, Eritrea

Telegram: President Issayas Afewerki, Asmara, Eritrea

Salutation: Your Excellency

Ms Fawzia Hashim

Minister of Justice

Ministry of Justice

P O Box 241

Asmara, Eritrea

Telegrams: Minister of Justice, Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 126422

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 20 April 2004.