

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

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Torture in Eritrea: ‘Every night you hear shouts and cries of people being beaten’

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/torture-eritrea-every-night-you-hear-shouts-and-cries-people-being-beaten-2013-06-02>

Kidane Isaac says he never thought he was going to see hell, but that was before he was arrested and incarcerated in some of Eritrea’s notorious detention centres.

“Every night you hear shouts and cries of people being beaten. I remember I was beaten very terribly, with metal bars,” he told Amnesty International from his home in Israel where he now lives as an asylum-seeker.

Kidane was 18 years old and had been working as a construction worker when he was detained as he attempted to flee the country to escape indefinite conscription to national service. For six months, Kidane was held in three different detention centres. He described terrible conditions in the prisons, where torture and other ill-treatment, including severe beatings, were common.

“The second place I was imprisoned in [was] Mai Edaga. There are two holes, covered with a zinc cover, it was very crowded, we got two breads a day, there were flies all the time, it was very dirty. It is a very terrible place,” Kidane said.

“We were arrested out of the blue and taken to prison. There was no accusation, no interview. There was no lawyer. It was crazy,” he said.

Kidane’s story mirrors that of thousands of other Eritreans, who have been detained without charge or trial – some for up to 20 years. Amnesty International estimates that at least 10,000 political prisoners have been arbitrarily detained by the government of President Isaias Afewerki, who has ruled since the country’s independence in 1993.

“Twenty years on from the euphoric celebrations of independence, Eritrea is one of the most repressive, secretive and inaccessible countries in the world,” said Claire Beston, Amnesty International’s Eritrea researcher.

“The government has systematically used arbitrary arrest and detention without charge to crush all opposition, to silence all dissent, and to punish anyone who refuses to comply with the repressive restrictions it places on people’s lives.”

Eritreans in exile estimate there are more than 200 detention facilities in the country. Places of detention include military camps, prisons, police stations and high-security establishments.

Former detainees describe conditions as “hell”. Cells are usually severely overcrowded with prisoners forced to sleep *cortielo*: crammed together, only able to sleep on their sides, unable to move. Many cells have no sanitation facilities and prisoners are only allowed out to use toilets once or twice a day; food is usually minimal and drinking water is also severely limited; infectious diseases are widespread.

In many detention centres some prisoners are held in underground cells, and the use of metal

shipping containers is common. In both types of cell, detainees suffer extreme heat during the day and severe cold at night.

Routine torture

As well as enduring the hellish conditions, many detainees are subjected to torture during interrogations and as punishment. Torture methods include prisoners having their hands and feet tied behind their back for extended periods and left exposed to the sun for many hours.

In the Dahlak Kebir island prison – one of the country’s most notorious prisons due to its harsh conditions in very high temperatures – a former prisoner said three people were left tied in this position for 55 days. Another man told Amnesty International how he had seen a fellow prisoner and friend lose one of his hands after being left in the sun with his elbows tied tightly behind his back.

One former detainee described being made to walk between two detention centres: “I had to walk barefoot for approximately 2 kilometres. It was horrible. The heat blurred my brain. I couldn’t stop walking; if I had, my feet would have burned. When someone began to sway, they hit him. My feet were swollen and blistered.”

Prisoners have often been subjected to prolonged periods of beating with whips and kicking. Female detainees reported being beaten for refusing the sexual advances of officers and prison guards.

On top of the horrific conditions and the daily threat of beatings, for Kidane, the prospect of years in prison would lead to feelings of utter despair. As with thousands of prisoners in Eritrea, he had no contact with his family – they did not know where he was or if he was dead or alive.

“No one knew how long they were going to be in prison. You were never able to get any information about your situation. You can only think about how to escape,” he said.

Security was lax in the last place Kidane was held and he saw an opportunity to escape. One night, as a friend distracted the prison guard on duty, he and two of his friends made a run for it. They fled to Asmara, Eritrea’s capital, from where they were smuggled across the border to Sudan. Kidane now lives in Israel as an asylum-seeker.

Kidane considers himself lucky as he reflects on his new life as an asylum-seeker. “The life of being an [asylum-seeker], with an undefined future is difficult, but this is another chapter of my life,” he said.

Throughout the two decades of Eritrea’s independence Amnesty International has been highlighting the plight of detainees. Calls on President Isaias Afewerki – to release all prisoners of conscience immediately, to put an end to torture and other ill-treatment, and to ensure the right to a fair trial – have fallen on deaf ears.

Background Information

Eritrea: Rampant repression 20 years after independence

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/eritrea-rampant-repression-20-years-after-independence-2013-05-09>

Twenty years of independence but still no freedom (Report, 9 May 2013)

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AFR64/001/2013/en/64b58cdf-a431-499c-9830-f4d66542c8da/afr640012013en.pdf>