

PUBLIC

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UA 197/05 Fear of torture or ill-treatment/incommunicado detention/detention without charge

ERITREA Hundreds of relatives of military conscription evaders and deserters

Several hundred relatives of people who have evaded or deserted from military conscription have reportedly been arrested in the Debub region of southern Eritrea since 15 July. They are held incommunicado, many in harsh conditions, and are at risk of torture or ill-treatment. Some reportedly began a hunger strike in protest at their detention. Amnesty International fears that the arrest campaign could be extended to all other parts of the country.

Those arrested were the fathers, mothers or other relatives of men or women over the age of 18 who have either failed to report for national service since 1994, failed to attend the compulsory final school year at Sawa military training camp, abandoned their army unit, or left the country illegally. The relatives have been accused of facilitating their evasion of conscription or flight abroad. Officials reportedly offered them release on bail of between 10,000 and 50,000 nakfa (US\$660 to US\$3,300), if they guaranteed that they would produce their missing relative.

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. They are held incommunicado in different prisons. Many held in Adi Keih town prison reportedly began a hunger strike in protest at their detention and have been moved to Mai Serwa military camp near the capital Asmara. Prison conditions for political detainees in Eritrea are harsh, with many held in metal shipping containers or underground cells.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Thousands of young men and women have sought asylum in Sudan and other countries since Eritrea's war with Ethiopia from 1998 to 2000, in an effort to avoid conscription or after deserting from the army. National service, compulsory for all men and women aged between 18 and 40, has been extended indefinitely from the original 18 months' service enacted 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. Torture and indefinite arbitrary detention are used as punishments for military offences.

Amnesty International is investigating reports that many conscripts detained for military offences at Wia army camp, east of the capital Asmara, were killed by armed guards in a prison break-out in early June 2005. There has been no inquiry into the killing of over a dozen people among some thousands of suspected conscription evaders arrested in Asmara and detained at the nearby Adi Abeto army prison on 4 November (see UA 301/04, AFR 64/008/2004, 9 November 2004).

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

- expressing concern at reports of hundreds of arrests in Debub region of parents and relatives of military conscription evaders and deserters;
- expressing concern that they are being detained solely because of their relationship to those who have evaded or deserted military service, and calling for their immediate release unless they are to be charged with a recognizably criminal offence;
- calling for guarantees that they will not be tortured or ill-treated in detention;

- urging the authorities to grant immediate access to relatives, lawyers and any necessary medical treatment to all the detainees, including those who reportedly began a hunger strike;
- expressing concern at reports that officials have told the detainees that they can be bailed on payment of large sums of money.

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

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 8 September 2005.