

PUBLIC

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UA 67/04 Fear of torture / fear of ill-treatment / Detention without charge

ERITREA 28 Jehovah's witnesses

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On 24 January 2004 Eritrean police arrested 38 members of the Jehovah's Witnesses religion who were holding a religious service in a private home in the capital, Asmara. Ten were released without charge in the next few days but 28 remain in custody, including children, and a 90-year-old man. Amnesty International considers them prisoners of conscience, detained solely because of their religious beliefs.

The Eritrean authorities have not publicly acknowledged the arrests or given any reason for them. The whereabouts of the 28 are not known, but they are believed to be held in one of Eritrea's many secret detention centres.

Amnesty International fears they could be tortured or ill-treated to force them to abandon their faith, and that those of conscription age (18-40) could be forced into military service and tortured if, in accordance with the principles of their faith, they refuse.

#### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

The Eritrean Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of religion. However, Jehovah's Witnesses in Eritrea (who number about 1,600) have frequently been arrested on account of their faith's principle of refusing military service. In 1994 the government stripped all members of the religion of basic civil and political rights. In March 2002, along with at least 12 minority Christian sects, they were prohibited from practising their religion and were ordered to register with the Department of Religious Affairs. None of these faiths has been granted a permit so far and some have refused on principle to comply with the far-reaching order to disclose details of their membership, foreign funding and activities. Over 330 members of these faiths who were arrested in 2003 are detained incommunicado in secret prisons without charge or trial, including scores of conscripts. Many have been tortured or ill-treated in attempts to force them to abandon their faith. Former detainees at a secret 8000-inmate prison on the main Dahlak island in the Red Sea have recently given testimony that inmates found praying have been tortured, and that bibles and religious audio-cassettes have been burned.

Three Jehovah's Witnesses have been detained incommunicado in Sawa military training centre in western Eritrea since 1994, without charge or trial, for refusing to bear arms. National service is compulsory for all men and women aged 18 to 40, with no observance of the internationally-recognised right to conscientious objection. It is supposed to consist of six months' military service, and 12 months non-military duties. In practice, since the Ethiopian war (1998-2000), national service has generally turned into indefinite military service.

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

- expressing grave concern that 28 Jehovah's witnesses arrested in Asmara on 24 January are now detained without charge;
- appealing for them to be released immediately and unconditionally;
- calling for the authorities to respect the right to religious freedom guaranteed by the Constitution and laws of Eritrea;

- asking the authorities to ensure that the 28 Jehovah's witnesses are treated humanely while they are in custody, and given immediate access to their families, medical treatment and legal representatives;
- appealing to the authorities to stop the arbitrary arrest, torture and ill-treatment of these members of minority churches arrested for their religious beliefs.

**APPEALS TO:**

His Excellency Issayas Afewerki  
President of the State of Eritrea  
Office of the President  
P O Box 257  
Asmara, Eritrea

**Salutation:     Your Excellency**

Ms Fawzia Hashim  
Minister of Justice  
Ministry of Justice  
P O Box 241  
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  
Office of the President  
P O Box 257  
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 March 2004.