

PUBLIC

AI Index: AFR 64/006/2004

01 June 2004

UA 187/04 Fear of torture

ERITREA **Haile Naizgi (m), pastor (minister) and chairperson of the Eritrean Full Gospel Church**
Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel (m), pastor of the Eritrean Full Gospel Church
Tesfatsion Hagos (m), pastor of the Rema evangelical church

Church leaders Haile Naizgi and Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel were arrested at their homes in the capital, Asmara, on 23 May. They are reportedly held incommunicado in the 1st and 6th police stations respectively, in Asmara. Amnesty International considers them prisoners of conscience, arrested solely because of their religious beliefs. They are at risk of torture to force them to abandon their faith. They have not been taken to court within 48 hours, as required by law, or charged with any offence.

Tesfatsion Hagos, pastor of the Rema evangelical church in Asmara, was arrested on 27 May while on a visit to Massawa port. His whereabouts are not yet known, but he too is believed to have been arrested solely on account of his religious beliefs.

Haile Naizgi is the chairperson of one of Eritrea's largest pentecostal churches, the Eritrean Full Gospel Church (also known as Mullu Wongel church). Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel, a former chairperson, is now a pastor. Their arrests are part of an intensifying wave of government persecution of minority Christian evangelical and pentecostal churches in Eritrea.

Both men are in their 40s. Haile Naizgi, formerly an accountant for World Vision, is married with four children. Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel, a former mathematics lecturer at the University of Asmara, with a PhD from a US university, is also chair of the Eritrean Evangelical Alliance, a grouping of different churches including the Rema church.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Hundreds of members of Eritrea's evangelical and pentecostal churches, both adults and children, and several pastors, have been arrested since early 2003, following a government directive of May 2002 closing them down the minority churches and ordering them to register with the new Department of Religious Affairs. Many people have been tortured to try to force them to abandon their faith. Men and women of military conscription age (18-45) have been drafted into the army.

The government appears to be opposed to the right to freedom of religious belief and worship for the rapidly-growing minority churches, which have attracted many youth converts, particularly from the official Eritrean Orthodox Church. Although criticism of the government is severely repressed, the minority churches have questioned official measures taken against them and have criticised arrests and ill-treatment of their members.

Amnesty International released a 49-page report on human rights violations in Eritrea on 19 May (*Eritrea – "You have no right to ask" - Government rejects scrutiny on human rights*, AI Index: AFR 64/003/2004), which included an appeal to President Issayas Afewerki on the occasion of Eritrea's 11th anniversary of formal independence from Ethiopia on 24 May to stop religious persecution. The government has made no reply.

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

- appealing for church leaders Haile Naizgi, Dr Kiflu Gebremeskal and Tesfatsion Hagos to be released immediately and unconditionally, as they are prisoners of conscience, imprisoned solely on account of their faith;
- calling for them to be treated humanely and allowed immediate access to their families, legal counsel, medical doctors if needed, and representatives of a humanitarian organization such as the International Committee of the Red Cross;
- urging the government to end its campaign of religious persecution, directed against minority Christian churches in Eritrea, and release all people detained on account of their faith.

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

Fax: +2911 126422

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 126995

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 13 July 2004.