

PUBLIC

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03 June 2005

UA 151/05 Prisoner of Conscience/Torture or ill-treatment/Detention without charge

**ERITREA Binyam Gezay (m)
Essey Stefanos (m)
Over 200 other members of the Meseret Christos evangelical church**

The security forces arrested a wedding party of over 200, including the bride and groom on 28 May, in the capital, Asmara. All are reported to be members of the Meseret Christos church, which is banned in Eritrea. They are at grave risk of being tortured to force them to renounce their faith. Amnesty International believes they are prisoners of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of religion.

Those arrested are held in a police station in the Expo district of Asmara. A few were released without charge on 29 May, but most are still in custody. The only names available are those of the groom, Binyam Gezay, and a gospel singer, Essey Stefanos. By law they should have been brought before a court within 48 hours of arrest, but this has not been done.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Religious persecution is a feature of life in Eritrea, despite government claims to the contrary. Since 2002, only the Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran Christian churches have been allowed to operate, and evangelical churches have been banned. There are frequent reports of the security forces torturing evangelical church members, who have continued worshipping clandestinely, in an attempt to force them to abandon their faith. Harassment of those defying the 2002 ban has intensified recently. Up to 900 members of banned churches were already in custody before the recent arrests. They are held in harsh conditions, in shipping containers, secret detention centres or underground prisons. They are detained in a number of military prisons, with over 230 in Sawa military conscription and training centre, near the Sudan border. Others are held in Mai Serwa army camp near Asmara, and police and security prisons in Asmara, the northern town of Keren and the Red Sea port of Assab.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of Binyam Gezay, Essey Stefanos and more than 200 members of the Meseret Christos church, arrested on 28 May in Asmara;
- calling for them to be released immediately and unconditionally, as they are prisoners of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of religion, which is guaranteed in the Eritrean Constitution;
- asking the authorities to ensure that they are not tortured or ill-treated in custody, and are given access to their families, lawyers and any medical attention they may require;
- calling for the hundreds of others detained simply on account of their religious beliefs to be released immediately and unconditionally;
- expressing concern that the prisoners have been arbitrarily detained without charge or trial, contrary to human rights provisions in the Eritrea Constitution and laws which require that arrested persons are brought before a court within 48 hours.

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

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 15 July 2005.