

PUBLIC

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13 October 2005

UA 270/05 Fear of torture/prisoners of conscience

ERITREA Ukbay (m)]
 Yergalem Afewerki (f)]
 Abraham (m)]
 Berhane (m)]
 Eden (f)]
 Elsa (f)] Kale Hiwot (Baptist) Church members
 Freweyni (f)]
 Gebremichael (m)]
 Hamelmal (f)]
 Pastor Simon (m)]
 Teklemariam (m)]
 Sirak Gebremichael (m)]

Akberet Nigussie (f), Rema Church office administrator

Up to 200 other members of evangelical churches

Over 200 members of evangelical churches have been detained in a mass and coordinated crackdown by the Eritrean authorities in the capital, Asmara. Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience, detained solely because of their religious beliefs. They are at risk of torture.

They have not been charged with any offence and have not been brought before a court within 48 hours, as required by law. All are believed to be held in the 5th Police Station, in Asmara.

Sirak Gebremichael, Teklemariam, Pastor Simon and at least two other members of the Kale Hiwot (Baptist) Church were detained on 30 September. They are held without charge at the 5th Police Station. Akberet Nigussie, from the Rema Church, was also detained and taken to the same police station that day. Office equipment and documents were seized from the premises of both churches, which have been under continuous surveillance by the security forces for some days.

The others named above are all staff of the Kale Hiwot Church's Development Project, which provides emergency humanitarian assistance across the country. On 3 October they were arrested and the Project's offices were closed. They are believed to be held in the same police station.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since 2002, only the Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran Christian churches have been allowed to operate in Eritrea. Members of minority Christian evangelical churches face fierce persecution, even though freedom of religion is guaranteed in the Eritrean Constitution. On 4 September police arrested a couple from the Hallelujah Church during their wedding ceremony in a private home in Asmara. The police also arrested 18 wedding guests, seven women and 13 men, among them a member of the Philadelphia Church. They are reportedly detained at the 5th Police Station in Asmara.

Over 1,000 members of minority churches in Eritrea, including up to 19 pastors, are currently detained. There have been frequent reports of the security forces torturing detained evangelical church members, who have continued worshipping despite the ban, in an attempt to force them to abandon their faith. The detainees are held incommunicado in harsh conditions without charge or trial. They are imprisoned in secret

detention centres and army camps in different parts of the country, including the main military training centre at Sawa. Some are held in metal shipping containers and underground prisons. Several detainees have become seriously ill through denial of medical treatment.

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

- expressing concern that at least 200 members of the Kale Hiwot, Rema and other evangelical churches have been arrested in Asmara since 30 September;
- 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 immediate access to their families, lawyers and any medical attention they may require;
- expressing concern that they have been arbitrarily detained without charge or trial, contrary to human rights provisions in the Eritrean Constitution and laws, which require that people are brought before a court within 48 hours of their arrest.

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 24 November 2005.