

PUBLIC

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UA 365/03 Prisoner of conscience/incommunicado detention/fear of torture or ill-treatment/
medical concern

Aster Yohannes (f), aged 45

Aster Yohannes, the wife of prisoner of conscience Petros Solomon, is being detained incommunicado at an unknown location and may be at risk of torture or ill-treatment. Amnesty International believes that she is a prisoner of conscience, detained solely because of her husband's peaceful expression of his political beliefs.

Aster Yohannes was detained by security personnel at the international airport in the capital Asmara on 11 December, when she returned after a three year period studying in the USA. She recently graduated in management studies from the University of Phoenix in Arizona. She had returned to Eritrea with a newly issued Eritrean passport, to be with her four children aged between six and 13, who had been cared for by her mother in her absence. She was reportedly given assurances of safety if she returned. The Eritrean authorities have given no reason for her arrest or said where she is held. She has not been permitted to see her family. Amnesty International fears she could be subjected to torture or ill-treatment, held in secret and detained for an indefinite period without charge or trial.

Aster Yohannes had undergone tests in the USA for a heart complaint, which were not completed before her departure. She also suffers from asthma. It is feared that these medical conditions could become more serious in detention, particularly as political detainees in Eritrea are held in harsh conditions and generally have very little access to medical care.

Her husband, Petros Solomon, is a former Minister of Foreign Affairs who has been detained incommunicado and in secret since September 2001, along with other prominent advocates of democratic reform whom the government claims were "traitors" in the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia. Aster Yohannes is a former member of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) forces, of which her husband was head of security. She had reportedly not herself been politically active since the EPLF won independence from Ethiopia in 1991 after a twenty-year liberation struggle and formed the new government. Amnesty International believes the sole reason for her detention is her husband's opposition to the Eritrean president, Issayas Afewerki.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Hundreds of peaceful opponents of the Eritrean government are illegally detained indefinitely in secret. Many are former members of the EPLF detained after calling for democratic reforms. The 1997 Constitution provides for multi-party elections and protection of human and legal rights, but elections have been postponed indefinitely and human rights provisions are constantly violated. Torture, including beatings and tying prisoners for long periods in a contorted position known as "the helicopter", is widespread. Detained political opponents, conscription evaders, army deserters and returned asylum seekers are particularly at risk of torture or ill-treatment.

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

- expressing concern for Aster Yohannes, who has been detained incommunicado at an unknown location since her arrest on 11 December;
- stating that she is a prisoner of conscience detained on account of the views of her husband, Petros Solomon, a prisoner of conscience, and calling for the immediate and unconditional release of both Aster Yohannes and Petros Solomon;

- expressing concern that Aster Yohannes may be imprisoned incommunicado for an indefinite period without any legal basis or charge;
- calling for assurances that she will not be tortured or ill-treated, and demanding that she is given immediate access to her family and legal representative;
- urging that she is given immediate access to a doctor of her choice to regularly monitor her heart condition and treat her for asthma as required.

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 125123 (it may be difficult to get through; please keep trying)

Salutation: Your Excellency

Brigadier Abraham Andom
Commissioner of Police
Ministry of Internal Affairs
P O Box 1223
Asmara, Eritrea

Telegram: Police Commissioner, Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 122135

Salutation: Dear Commissioner

COPIES TO:

Ms Fawzia Hashim
Minister of Justice
Ministry of Justice
P O Box 241
Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 126422

Brigadier General Abraha Kassa
Head of Security
Office of the President
P O Box 257
Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 125123

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 28 January 2004.