

PUBLIC

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UA 294/06 **Torture / Prisoners of conscience**
ERITREA **160 members of evangelical churches**
Killed: **Immanuel Andegergesh (m)**
 Kibrom Firemichael (m)

One hundred and sixty members of banned Christian churches are at grave risk of torture, following their arrest on 15 and 16 October. It is not known where they are being held. Two Christian men who were among the detainees reportedly died after being tortured in an effort to force them to renounce their faith. Amnesty International considers the detainees to be prisoners of conscience, held solely for the peaceful expression of their beliefs.

As part of the Eritrean government's continuing persecution of members of banned Christian churches, 150 women, men and children were arrested at their homes in Mendefera town, 50 km south of the capital Asmara, on 15 and 16 October. They are members of the Kale Hiwot (Word of God) Church, the Full Gospel Church, the Church of the Living God and the Rema church. Amnesty International has received reports that they are being tortured to make them sign a document agreeing to stop worshipping.

Also on 15 October, 12 members of the Rema church were arrested in Adi-Quala town, south of Mendefera, for taking part in Christian worship in a private home. Two of them, Immanuel Andegergesh and Kibrom Firemichael, reportedly died in a nearby army camp as a result of torture to make them abandon their faith.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since 2002, only the Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran Christian churches and Islam have been allowed to operate in Eritrea. Members of some 35 minority Christian evangelical churches face fierce persecution, even though freedom of religion is guaranteed in the Eritrean Constitution. An estimated 2,000 members of minority churches, including about 20 pastors, are currently detained. Detainees are held incommunicado in harsh conditions without charge or trial. They are imprisoned in police stations at first, then in army camps and security prisons 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 and are rarely provided with adequate medical treatment. They are repeatedly tortured by being beaten and being tied up in painful positions, in an effort to make them cease worshipping and recant their faith.

Gospel singer Helen Berhane, a member of the Rema church, was released in late October 2006 after more than two years in detention. Helen Berhane had been the subject of major campaigns by Amnesty International and other organisations. She had been detained without charge or trial in Mai Serwa army camp, first in a metal shipping container and later in an underground cell. In September 2006 she was admitted to hospital after sustaining injuries during torture. She is reportedly recovering, though she is still using a wheelchair. Pastor Iyob Berhe of the Kale Hiwot church, who was arrested in 2005, was also recently admitted to hospital recently. He was then transferred to Mendefera police station.

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

- welcoming the release of Helen Berhane;
- expressing concern about recent arrests in Mendefera and Adi-Quala of some 160 members of Kale Hiwot, Rema and other evangelical churches;

- calling for them to be released immediately and unconditionally, as they are prisoners of conscience, detained solely for the exercise of their right to freedom of religion, as guaranteed in the Eritrean Constitution;
- calling on the authorities to ensure that they are not tortured or ill-treated in custody, and that they 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;
- calling for an impartial investigation into the reported deaths in custody as a result of torture of Immanuel Andegergesh and Kibrom Firemichael in an army camp near Adi-Quala after their arrests on 15 October.

APPEALS TO:

President

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

Fax: + 2911 125123

Salutation: Your Excellency

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

Salutation: Dear Minister

Fax: + 2911 126422

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

Fax: + 2911 120014

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 December 2006.