

AI Index: PRE 01/462/2011
16 September 2011

Eritrea: Prisoners of conscience held for a decade must be released

The Eritrean authorities must immediately and unconditionally release 11 prominent politicians, including three former cabinet ministers, who have been held incommunicado without charge for 10 years, Amnesty International said today.

The activists, all former members of the Central Council of the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) party, were arrested after calling for democratic reform.

Together with four other members of parliament, they had formed the G15/Group of 15 and published an open letter to the government and President Isaias Afewerki calling for "democratic dialogue".

The four other members of the G15 escaped arrest: three were out of the country and one withdrew his support for the group.

After the arrest of the activists, the Eritrean government said the 11 had committed crimes "against the security of the nation".

The group had all been senior military or political leaders during the 30-year long war of independence with Ethiopia.

"This anniversary is a harrowing reminder of President Afewerki's complete disregard for the essential right of freedom of expression. For more than a decade, he has brutally suppressed any legitimate criticism of his government," said Michelle Kagari, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for Africa.

"The ten-year incommunicado detention of these activists violates numerous rights protected under Eritrean and international law" said Michelle Kagari.

In the ten years that they have been detained, the Eritrean authorities have refused to confirm their whereabouts or their health status to their families.

Holding them incommunicado increases the risk that they will be tortured or ill-treated while in detention, including by denying them adequate medical care.

Prison conditions in Eritrea are notoriously dire. Prisoners are subjected to extreme desert temperatures whilst held in underground cells and shipping containers. Physical and mental illness are rife amongst detainees.

Several members of the group were already suffering from medical conditions when they were arrested ten years ago. In recent years there have been reports that nine of the eleven have died in detention. The authorities have not responded to these allegations.

When the activists were arrested ten years ago Amnesty International identified them as Prisoners of Conscience, arrested simply because of their peaceful criticisms of the government. The organisation called for their immediate and unconditional release.

“A decade later we continue to demand that the G15 detainees be released immediately. Their incommunicado, indefinite detention must end. Their families must be told of their whereabouts, and they must be given access to lawyers as well as any medical treatment they need,” said Michelle Kagari.

Among the 11 prisoners is Aster Fissehatsion, a veteran fighter of the war of independence and a former prominent member of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF).

The group also includes her ex-husband, former vice-president and foreign minister Mahmoud Ahmed Sheriffo, as well as Haile Woldetensae, and Petros Solomon, both of whom are also former foreign ministers.

Appeals from their families and human rights activists that the prisoners be formally charged and tried or else released, and criticising their secret incommunicado detention, have been dismissed repeatedly by the Eritrean authorities.

In the months following the arrest of G15 members, dozens of journalists, government critics and supporters of the dissidents were also detained in a sweeping crackdown on freedom of expression. Many of those arrested also continue to be detained without trial.

In the decade since the G15 prisoners were arrested the Eritrean authorities have repeatedly used arbitrary arrests, detentions and torture to stifle opposition. No opposition parties, independent journalism or civil society organizations are allowed.

President Isaias Afewerki and the ruling PFDJ, the only permitted political party, exert complete control over the state without a hint of elections which have been indefinitely delayed.

“Thousands of political prisoners are languishing in dire conditions, many in secret detention, across Eritrea”, said Michelle Kagari. “We call on the Eritrean government to issue an amnesty for all political prisoners and to respect their right to freedom of expression.”