
amnesty international

Eritrea

Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review

**Sixth session of the UPR Working Group of the
Human Rights Council
November-December 2009**



Executive summary

In this submission, Amnesty International provides information under sections C and D, as stipulated in the *General Guidelines for the Preparation of Information under the Universal Periodic Review*.¹

- Section C highlights Amnesty International's concerns in relation to restrictions on the right to freedom of religion, political prisoners and restrictions on freedom of the media.
- In section D, Amnesty International makes a number of recommendations for action by the government to address the areas of concern.

¹ Contained in Human Rights Council Decision 6/102, Follow-up to Human Rights Council resolution 5/1, section I adopted 27 September 2007.

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C. Promotion and protection of human rights on the ground

Restrictions on freedom of religion

Members of banned religious groups are at risk of arrest and incommunicado detention. Only four faiths are officially recognised in Eritrea: the Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran Churches and Islam. In 2002, the government banned all minority religious groups. Members of these groups continue to suffer harassment and arbitrary detention. Over 3,000 members of religious minority groups are believed to be detained in Eritrea, often having been arrested while worshipping in their own homes or attending religious ceremonies, including weddings. They were detained without charge or trial, and often subjected to torture or other ill-treatment. They are often only released when they agree to stop attending religious gatherings, or are released from hospital after treatment for injuries sustained as a result of torture or ill-treatment. Jehovah's Witnesses have been subjected to especially harsh treatment at the hands of the state. In 1994, they were stripped of basic citizenship rights for refusing to bear arms or perform military service.

In October 2007, Pastor Ogbamichael Teklehaimot of the Kale Hiwot Church was arrested; he remains in detention. Previously, he had been subjected to ten months of solitary confinement and hard labour at the Sawa military camp.

Amnesty International has received reports that individuals have been tortured in order to force them to denounce their faith or to punish them for performing religious activities while in detention. Prisoners have reported being locked in metal shipping containers, which magnify already extreme temperatures, or being exposed to the sun for extended periods of time. Prison conditions are generally harsh. Cells and other confinement spaces are overcrowded, damp and unhygienic. Prisoners are often malnourished and do not have access to clean drinking water.

Members of registered religions are also at risk of detention if they are seen to oppose or resist government directives. Abune Antonios, the 80 year old Patriarch and former head of the Eritrean Orthodox Church has been detained since January 2006 for resisting government interference in church affairs. In late 2004, he protested against the detention of three Orthodox priests, and in January 2005, his executive powers were removed by the church authorities. On 13 January 2006, he was formally removed from office and placed under house arrest. On 20 January, two priests accompanied by three government security agents entered his home and confiscated his personal pontifical insignia. He was held under house arrest until May 2007, when he was taken into custody by security forces and held in a specially converted house in the capital Asmara. Amnesty International is seriously concerned for Patriarch Antonios' health as he suffers from diabetes and it is believed that he has not been receiving medication. On 27 May 2007, the government announced that it had appointed a new Patriarch, in spite of rules set out by the Orthodox Church which forbids the appointment of a new Patriarch while the current Patriarch is still alive.

The authorities have also detained a number of Muslims for opposing the government appointment of the Chief Mufti. They claimed that Sheikh Al-Amin had been appointed without consultation with the Muslim community of Eritrea. On 13-14 August 2008, at least forty Muslim clerics and scholars from the Saho ethnic group were arrested in Asmara, Senafe, Adi Keyh, Tsorona, Segeneiti, Dekemhare, Foro, Hadish, and Idafalo in the coastal Red Sea region. They were arrested in the middle of the night and taken away in unmarked cars.

Amnesty International has received multiple reports of the death in detention of religious prisoners as a result of harsh conditions and treatment, or from lack of medical care for treatable diseases. In February 2007, imprisoned Christian Magos Solomon Semere died, after four and a half years in detention. He had been denied treatment for pneumonia. In October 2008, Teklesenbet Gebreab Kiflom, was reported to have died in Wia prison, after prison officials refused to provide him with medical treatment for malaria. Two other Christians, Mogos Hagos Kiflom and Mehari Gebreneguse Asegedom also reportedly died in custody in January 2009.

Political Prisoners

Throughout the period of review, the Eritrean authorities have frequently arrested suspected government critics. There is little tolerance of dissent in the country, and no permitted forum for independent expression of political opinion or political association.

It is very difficult to obtain information on people who 'disappear' into secret detention. Families face reprisals from authorities for inquiring about an arrest or communicating with international human rights organisations.

At least eleven former government ministers and Eritrean liberation veterans who called for democratic reform and greater respect for human rights remain in secret detention following their arrest on 18 September 2001. Known as the G-15, they have never been charged or appeared in court to face trial, although the government has accused them of treason. Their exact location and health status have never been revealed by the government. At least one of the eleven, General Ogbe Abraha, reportedly died in custody due to the harsh conditions and lack of access to medical treatment. Another member of the group, Aster Fissehatsion, is said to suffer from stomach ulcers. Two US embassy staff, Ali Al-Amin and Kiflom Gebremichael, were arrested on 1 October 2001, reportedly in retaliation for US criticism of the arrest of the G-15. They remain in detention.

Restrictions on freedom of the media

No independent or private press has been permitted by the authorities following the closure of all independent media in late September 2001.

Ten journalists who protested against the closure of the media and complained to the Ministry of Information were arrested in late September 2001. They remain in incommunicado detention and have never been charged or brought before a court to face trial. The government has refused to confirm their location and health status. Four of the journalists, Fessahaye ("Joshua") Yohannes, Medhanie Haile, Said Abdulkadir and Yosuf Mohamed Ali are believed to have died in custody.

On 19 November 2005, one of the journalists, Dawit Issac, was released from custody. He was re-arrested two days later while on his way to hospital. The authorities claimed that he had only been temporarily released in order to undergo medical treatment. In January 2009, he was reportedly admitted to an Air Force hospital in Asmara, although the government has refused to confirm this. He is believed to be seriously ill, although the extent and cause of his illness remain unknown.

Mattewos Habteab was the editor of the newspaper Meqaleh from 1998 until June 2000, when he was called up for military service. A year later, he returned to his job in Asmara, but was arrested and taken to the

“Track B” military prison in Asmara where he was believed to be held for approximately six weeks. In late September 2001, not long after his release, he was re-arrested as part of the government's clamp-down on the independent press. He has been held incommunicado at an undisclosed location ever since.

Saleh Al-Jezaeri, an Eritrean radio and newspaper journalist, was arrested in February 2002, and has been held incommunicado ever since. His location has not been disclosed by the government, but there are reports that he is held in a special security prison known as “Karchele” in Asmara.

Since 2001, the government has tightly controlled all media and continues to clamp down on any perceived dissent within the state media. On 22 February 2009, at least fifty employees of Radio Bana were arrested by the security forces. Although some were released, an unknown number remain in detention. No reason has been given for their arrest and they have not been charged with any offence.

At least four journalists have been imprisoned since 2005 for attempting to enter Ethiopia and Sudan. They include Daniel Kibrom, with Eri-TV, who is reported to be serving five years hard labour in Eritrea for attempting to cross the border into Ethiopia.

D. Recommendations for action by the State under review

Amnesty International calls on the government of Eritrea:

Religious and political prisoners:

- To immediately end the practice of torture and other ill-treatment;
- To establish independent and impartial investigations into all allegations of torture or other ill-treatment of prisoners, and to bring the perpetrators to justice in accordance with international standards of fair trial;
- To immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners detained solely because of their political, religious or other conscientiously held beliefs;
- To charge all other prisoners with a recognisable criminal offence and try them in court in accordance with international standards for fair trial;
- To confirm the names, locations and health status of all detainees, and to confirm any deaths which have occurred in detention;
- To allow the ICRC immediate, full and unconditional access to all detainees; and
- To provide all detainees immediate access to a lawyer of their choice, to their families and to any medical treatment they may require.

Appendix: Amnesty International documents for further reference²

Eritrea: Prisoners of conscience remembered on 7th anniversary of mass detentions, 18 September 2008, AI Index: AFR 64/007/2008

Eritrea: Torture, 5 September 2008, AI Index 64/005/2008

Eritrea/Egypt: Arbitrary detention/fear of torture and other ill-treatment, 13 August 2008, AI Index 64/004/2008

Eritrea: On 6th anniversary of mass detentions of dissidents, human rights violations continue unabated, 18 September 2007, AI Index: AFR 64/009/2007

Eritrea: Prisoners of conscience/ fear of torture or other ill-treatment/ incommunicado detention, 5 September 2007, AI Index: AFR 64/008/2007

Eritrea: Further information on prisoner of conscience/ detention without trial/ incommunicado detention/ medical concern: Abune Antonios, 20 May 2007, AI Index: AFR 64/006/2007

Eritrea: Prominent journalist reported dead in secret prison, 15 February 2007, AFR 64/002/2007

Eritrea: Five years on, members of parliament and journalists remain in secret detention without trial, with fears that some may have died in custody, 18 September 2006, AI Index: AFR 64/009/2006

Eritrea: Independence Day call for a year of urgent human rights improvements, 25 May 2006, AI Index: AFR 64/004/2006

Eritrea: Religious persecution, 7 December 2005, AI Index: AFR 64/013/2005

² All of these documents are available on Amnesty International's website: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/eritrea>