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Eritrea: Independence Day call for a year of urgent human rights improvements

Today on Eritrean Independence Day, Amnesty International is making a new call to Eritrea's President Issayas Afewerki to make the coming 14th year of Eritrea's formal independence a year for the implementation of the human rights improvements urgently awaited by the international community, as well as many Eritreans in the country and abroad.

Amnesty International is renewing its appeals to the government to release men and women who are prisoners of conscience detained without charge, trial or any legal status, because of their political opinions or religious beliefs, or because they or their children have evaded military service. Amnesty International is also renewing its calls to the international community -- the UN and its specialized agencies, the African Union, the European Union and other countries with specific bilateral ties with Eritrea -- to support these appeals in their relations with the Government of Eritrea.

Five of the six women prisoners of conscience for whose unconditional release Amnesty International appealed on Independence Day 2005 are still detained incommunicado and in harsh conditions -- Helen Berhane, Aster Fissehatsion, Aster Yohannes, Miriam Hagos and Senait Debessai.

Indeed, virtually all of the prisoners of conscience who were in prison a year ago and for whom Amnesty International and many others have been campaigning are still in prison, some for over a decade now. Whether held in official civilian or military prisons or secret prisons, they are still denied family visits. Not a single one has been charged or brought to court. Refusal of medical treatment is still the norm. The pattern of torture and cruel detention conditions in metal shipping containers is unchanged.

Amnesty International is also today re-releasing its December 2005 report on religious persecution in Eritrea, including other human rights violations, with new translations into the Tigrinya and Arabic languages so that it can be better available to Eritreans (The Tigrinya and Arabic translations of the report, *Eritrea: Religious Persecution*, AI Index 65/013/2005, December 2005, are available on the Amnesty International website at www.amnesty.org or write to eastafrika@amnesty.org). There has been no significant change to the situation of religious persecution and few known releases since the report was published.

International concern about a persistent pattern of serious human rights violations in Eritrea has been brushed aside by the Eritrean government. The government's only response to Amnesty International's report on religious persecution was the following media comment from the Acting Minister of Information: "Who are these Amnesty International people? We cannot run every day after such unsubstantiated fabrications." The government falsely claims there is "absolute religious freedom" as guaranteed by the Constitution.

Such is the level of secrecy and intimidation inside Eritrea, which affects Eritreans in the diaspora too, that few confirmed details are available on new political detainees in the past year. They currently include 10 Eritrean staff of the UN Military Mission to Eritrea and Ethiopia (UNMEE) administering a buffer zone between the two countries, who were detained earlier this month as relations deteriorated further between Eritrea and the UN.

Long-term prisoners of conscience

Eleven former government ministers who were also members of parliament are still detained without charge in one or more secret locations. The government continues to make unsubstantiated claims that former Foreign Minister Haile Woldetensae and others who had called for democratic reforms and elections had committed treason in the border war. Ten journalists detained at the same time in September 2001 are still in prison without charge, as well as two other journalists arrested since then. The independent press remains shut down.

Of thousands of men and women still held untried since the 2001 crackdown on political dissent, Hassan Kekiya, a businessman aged about 75 who had attempted to reconcile the government and its critics, was released in December 2005, possibly on medical grounds, after four years of incommunicado detention. Sadly, he was re-arrested last month without explanation. He suffers from diabetes, can only walk with a crutch, and has been in poor health as a result of harsh prison conditions. Other chronically sick prisoners include General Bitwoded Abraha (detained almost continuously since 1992), Aster Yohannes (detained on her return from the US in December 2003), and Senait Debessai and her brother Ermias Debessai (both detained in November 2003). Three leaders of official trade unions have been detained secretly and uncharged for over a year.

The pattern of religious persecution, the subject of Amnesty International's most recent Eritrea report and campaigning, is unchanged, although there have apparently been fewer arrests so far in 2006 than the previous year. Evangelical gospel singer Helen Berhane, for whom there have been thousands of appeals worldwide -- with no government response -- is still in army custody since May 2004. The main government targets have been Jehovah's Witnesses, because they refuse military conscription, and members of evangelical Christian churches which were closed down in 2002. Some 70 members of a dissident Muslim group are also detained. 25 evangelical pastors as well as three "reformist" clerics of the officially permitted Eritrean Orthodox Church, whose elderly Patriarch is reportedly in poor health under house arrest since criticising their arrests, remain held with hundreds of other detainees under harsh conditions in the Karchele security prison in Asmara.

Men aged 18 to 40 years and women aged 18 to 27 years are subject to indefinite military conscription, with no right to perform alternative service on the grounds of conscientious objection. Many have tried to desert or evade conscription, fleeing to Sudan particularly, but they have been tortured and arbitrarily detained when captured. Increasing numbers of parents of missing conscripts have been arrested themselves in the past year and only released on payment of huge extra-legal fines -- beyond the financial capacity of most, who therefore remain detained indefinitely.

Background

Eritrea became formally independent on 24 May 1993 after a UN referendum and two years of de facto independence from Ethiopian rule won by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) which formed the new government. EPLF leader and current President Issayas Afewerki has indefinitely postponed elections required under the Constitution (1997), since the border conflict with Ethiopia (1998-2000). The boundary issue is still unresolved..

Opposition parties and independent non-governmental organisations are not allowed and criticisms of the government are vigorously suppressed. Religious worship by faith groups denied official registration (particularly evangelical Christians) is harshly punished.

Military conscription is rigorously enforced and tension with Ethiopia remains high. The government faces the threat of armed conflict from a Sudan-based opposition coalition.