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Eritrea: Five years on, members of parliament and journalists remain in secret detention without trial, with fears that some may have died in custody

Today is the fifth anniversary of the detentions without charge or trial of 11 former members of parliament, 10 journalists and hundreds of other men and women who were arrested in a crackdown on government critics calling for democratic reforms in September 2001.

Recent allegations have been publicly circulating that several of the 11 former senior government figures detained in a secret prison and some journalists said to have been held with them, have died in detention on account of the harsh conditions and denial of medical treatment. It has been claimed, for example, with no verifiable response by the Eritrean authorities, that General Ogbe Abraha, former army chief of staff, died in July 2002 of injuries from a failed suicide attempt, despite medical treatment. The other deaths allegedly occurred in later years after detainees fell ill. Amnesty International has been unable to obtain confirmation of these allegations and is investigating further. Despite numerous appeals over the years and international concern about their detentions, the authorities have never disclosed their whereabouts or conditions in detention or allowed any access to them.

In order to clarify the situation of these detainees, who in effect "disappeared" after arrest, Amnesty International calls on the government to form an independent and impartial inquiry team to visit the secret prison where the detainees are held, interview them privately, and report publicly on their situation and conditions of detention and health. Amnesty International again urges that the detentions should be brought within the framework of Eritrean constitutional and legal provisions, as well as the international human rights treaties which Eritrea has ratified, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The ICCPR prohibits arbitrary and incommunicado detention, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of prisoners, and unfair trial.

The 11 members of parliament (known as members of the "G15" or "group of 15" and including former government ministers) were publicly accused of "treason" during the war with Ethiopia, and the detained journalists were accused of supporting them through their publications as "spies and mercenaries". They have not been charged or brought to court. Amnesty International considers they are prisoners of conscience imprisoned on account of their opinions and criticism of the government. It is renewing its ongoing appeals for their unconditional release, as well as the release of all other prisoners of conscience, including those imprisoned on account of their religious beliefs.

Most of the several thousand political and religious prisoners in Eritrea are held incommunicado in secret security or military prisons, without being charged or taken to court. The families often do not know where they are held or even if they are alive. The authorities have told them, "You have no right to ask". Medical treatment is extremely poor. The pattern of ill-treatment, harsh conditions of detention, often in metal shipping containers, has persisted unchanged year after year. Torture continues to be regularly used as a punishment for prisoners such as military conscripts and religious prisoners.



Continuing religious persecution

The pattern of religious persecution reported by Amnesty International in December 2005 continues. Some 50 students were reportedly arrested in May 2006 for not joining an Independence Day rally. 29 worshippers were arrested at home prayer meetings in the capital Asmara, Keren town and Massawa port in mid-August 2006.

A total of about 2,000 men, women and children, including 35 pastors, who belong to evangelical Christian churches which were closed down in 2002, are held in some 14 prisons around the country. Gospel singer Helen Berhane, for whom there have been thousands of appeals worldwide, with no government response, has been held incommunicado for over two years in army custody. Although offered release if they sign a statement agreeing to abandon their faith and cease clandestine worshipping, few have done so, even when tortured.

31 Jehovah's Witnesses, three of whom are now in their 13th year of imprisonment, are also detained, as well as four clerics of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, whose Patriarch is reportedly under house arrest.

Some 70 members of a dissident Muslim group have been detained without charge for two years.

BACKGROUND

Eritrea became formally independent on 24 May 1993, after a UN referendum and two years of de facto independence from Ethiopian rule in 1991, when the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) formed the new government. Since the border conflict with Ethiopia in 1998-2000, the former EPLF leader and current President and leader of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), Issayas Afewerki, has indefinitely postponed the introduction of a multi-party system and elections, which are key parts of the 1997 Constitution. The Eritrea/Ethiopia boundary issue is still unresolved and remains an issue of high regional tension. In early September 2006, the UN again criticised restrictions placed by the Eritrean government on the monitoring work of the UN peace-keeping mission in the border area, deportations of five international staff and the arrest of a UN volunteer.

Opposition parties and independent civil society organisations or human rights defence groups are not allowed. Non-state media have been shut down since September 2001 and a total of 14 journalists are in detention. Criticism of the government is vigorously suppressed. Religious worship by faith groups denied official registration (that is, all except the permitted Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran churches and Islam) is forbidden, contrary to the Constitution's protection of the right to freedom of belief.

Several thousand men and women have fled from Eritrea since 2001. Those forcibly returned from Malta in 2002 and Libya in 2004 were detained and tortured. Several Eritrean asylum seekers have been rejected in western countries and some are in detention pending possible deportation to Eritrea. So far there has been general observance of the guidelines of the Office of the UN High Commission for Refugees opposing return of rejected asylum seekers to Eritrea on account of the poor human rights situation. 300 Eritrean asylum seekers in Libya who fled there from Sudan, including 80 women and three young children, were detained in Libya in August 2006 and face possible forcible return to Eritrea.