



## ERITREA

Head of state and government: Issayas Afewerki

Death penalty: retentionist

International Criminal Court: signed

Several thousand prisoners of conscience were detained incommunicado without charge or trial. Some former government leaders were held in a secret place of detention. The whereabouts of many political or religious prisoners, including journalists, were not known. Many were in effect victims of enforced disappearance. An army general remained held after 14 years, and three religious prisoners were still held after 12 years. Many detainees were tortured. Prison conditions, including being held in underground cells or metal shipping containers, amounted to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Virtually no medical treatment was provided.

### Background

Two thirds of the population were dependent on international emergency food aid. The government expelled several international NGOs delivering humanitarian assistance. Donors continued emergency humanitarian assistance but most had long suspended development aid because of the government's failure to implement both the constitutional process of democratization and international human rights treaties it had ratified.

As in previous years, human rights defenders were not allowed to operate and independent civil society organizations and unregistered faith groups were prohibited. The only political party allowed was the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), formerly the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). No dissent was tolerated.

The UN Security Council extended until January 2007 the UN Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) but criticized the stalemate in the negotiations over the border. Eritrea continued to demand that Ethiopia implement the International Boundary Commission's judgement following the 1998-2000 armed conflict and refused any negotiation on border demarcation. The UN Security Council criticized Eritrea's increasing restrictions on UNMEE's movements in the temporary security zone it administers on the Eritrean side of the border, and the arrests of several UNMEE personnel during 2006. It also criticized the incommunicado detention without charge or trial of an international UNMEE staff member, held for some weeks on reportedly false charges of trafficking.

The government continued to host armed Ethiopian and Sudanese opposition groups. It sent military assistance and weapons to the Union of Islamic Courts in Somalia, according to a UN panel monitoring violations of the Somalia arms embargo. It faced the threat of armed opposition from the Sudan-based Eritrean Democratic Alliance, which Ethiopia also supported.

### Religious persecution

Minority faith groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and over 35 evangelical Christian churches remained banned, their places of worship shut down and religious gatherings prohibited. Only the four main faiths in Eritrea were allowed to function - the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, the Lutheran (Mekane Yesus) Church and Islam. Dissenting groups within them were also repressed as were those who opposed government authority over them. Patriarch Antonios, head of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, was stripped of his powers in mid-2005 and has been held under house arrest since then for protesting at the 2004 detention of three Orthodox priests and secret prison sentences imposed on them.

Dozens of members of these banned churches were arrested during the year for worshipping at their homes, at weddings, or when proclaiming their faith to others. They were taken to police stations, security prisons or army camps, and often tortured or threatened to make them sign a statement as a condition of release that they would cease practising their faith. They were held incommunicado and illegally, without being brought before a court or charged with any offence. National service conscripts were also punished if they practised their faith.

An estimated 2,000 members of minority evangelical churches, including some 20 pastors, remained in detention in harsh conditions. They included children and women. At least 237 people were arrested during 2006, fewer than in 2005, possibly because of the vigorous international criticism of religious persecution. Most prisoners were held in remote army camps in underground cells or metal shipping containers. None had been allowed access to their families since their arrest. The pastors were mostly held together in Karchele security prison in Asmara.

- Helen Berhane, a well-known gospel singer in the evangelical Rema Church, was released in November after being detained in Mai Serwa army camp where she had been held since May 2004. The previous month she had been taken to hospital in Asmara in extremely poor health after being tortured again.

Three Jehovah's Witnesses remained held incommunicado at Sawa military camp near the Sudan border since 1994, when the government stripped all Jehovah's Witnesses of basic citizens' rights for refusing to bear arms or perform military service. Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested during the year, bringing to 27 the number held without charge or trial.

## **Prisoners of conscience and political prisoners**

Eleven former government ministers and former EPLF leaders remained in indefinite secret detention without charge or trial as prisoners of conscience following the September 2001 crackdown on dissent. Their whereabouts in detention had never been disclosed by the government or confirmed by other sources. There were fears for their safety after new claims in 2006 that General Ogba Abraha and possibly others held secretly with them had died in detention in the intervening years through illness and denial of adequate medical treatment. The government did not reply to appeals to clarify their fate or whereabouts or allow independent access to them. They had in effect become victims of enforced disappearance. They included former Vice-President Mahmoud Ahmed Sheriffo and his former wife Aster Fissehatsion, and former Foreign Ministers Haile Woldetsensae and Petros Solomon.

Hundreds of other prisoners of conscience arrested at the same time or later, who were alleged to have opposed the government, remained in detention incommunicado and without charge or trial. The whereabouts of many of them were not known. Several asylum-seekers forcibly returned from Malta in 2002 and Libya in 2003 were still detained.

- Aster Yohannes, Petros Solomon's wife and a former PFDJ central committee member, remained in incommunicado detention since 2003 when she returned from the USA to be with her children, whom she has not been allowed to see.

## **Journalists**

Nine journalists working for the state media were detained in November. One was released but by the end of 2006 eight continued to be held without charge or trial in the capital, Asmara.

Ten journalists working in the private media arrested in the 2001 crackdown on dissent and one working in the state media arrested in 2002 were still detained incommunicado without charge or trial. Some were held in the Karchele security prison in Asmara but the whereabouts of the others were not known. All private media remained banned since 2001.

## **Military conscription**

National service, comprising military service and development service such as road-building and construction work, remained compulsory and extended indefinitely for all men aged between 18 and 40, although women were reportedly allowed to leave at the age of 27. Conscript reserve duties extended to the age of 50 and former EPLF veterans were also subject to recall. Some conscripts were permitted to perform their service in civilian government employment but under military conditions.

The internationally recognized right of conscientious objection was denied. This applied particularly to Jehovah's Witnesses who refused military service (though not development service) on faith grounds.

The authorities instituted harsh measures to counter the widespread evasion of military service and desertion by thousands of conscripts. Police searches and round-ups were carried out, and hundreds of parents suspected of involvement with their children's evasion or desertion were detained, some possibly indefinitely. They were released only on payment of a large financial bond for the missing conscript to surrender.

## **Rule of law**

The few functioning courts failed to protect the constitutional rights not to be tortured or arbitrarily detained. Special Courts handed down prison sentences in secret summary trials for corruption and political offences where the accused had no right to legal defence representation or appeal. Secret administrative security committees reportedly imposed prison sentences without any semblance of trial.

Military courts were not functioning. Military conscripts accused of a military offence such as desertion, attempted desertion or being absent without permission were arbitrarily imprisoned or punished with torture, or possibly executed in the most serious cases, on the order of their military commander.

## **Torture and ill-treatment**

Suspected government opponents and alleged supporters of exile opposition groups were tortured in security or military custody. Religious prisoners were tortured to force them to abandon their faith. Torture was also a long-established punishment for civilian prisoners held in army or security custody and conscripts accused of military offences. Methods included being tied in painful positions for hours or days, particularly that known as "helicopter", and beatings.

Religious and political prisoners were held in harsh conditions amounting to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Many were held in metal shipping containers which were overcrowded, lacked sanitary facilities and were subject to extreme temperatures. Medical treatment was virtually non-existent and prisoners were only taken to hospital when they were almost dying. General Bitwoded Abraha, detained almost continually since 1992 in Karchele security prison in Asmara, suffered mental illness for years due to poor prison conditions but has received no medical or psychiatric treatment. Aster Yohannes was also in poor health in the same prison without adequate medical treatment.

## **Statements**

- Eritrea: Independence Day call for a year of urgent human rights improvements (AI Index: AFR 64/004/2006)
- Eritrea: Five years on, members of parliament and journalists remain in secret detention without trial (AI Index: AFR 64/009/2006)

