

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL REPORT SUMMARY

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Eritrea: 20 years of Independence; but still no freedom

On 24 May 1993, Eritrea was formally recognised as an independent nation after a UN-supervised referendum that confirmed the country's separation from Ethiopia, against whom it had fought a 30-year war. Twenty years on from the euphoric celebrations and promise of independence, thousands of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners languish in Eritrea's prisons without charge or trial, for expressing their opinion, practising their religion or attempting to flee the repression in their country.

Throughout the 20 years of Eritrea's independence, the government of President Isaias Afewerki has systematically used arbitrary arrest and detention to crush all opposition, to silence all dissent, and to punish anyone who refuses to comply with the repressive system. Thousands of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners have disappeared into secret and incommunicado detention – without charge or trial, and with no contact with the outside world.

Those in detention include actual or suspected critics or opponents of the government, politicians, journalists, members of unregistered as well as registered religious groups, people caught trying to evade or desert indefinite national service conscription or trying to flee the country. Family members have been arrested in place of individuals who have defected.

With no known exceptions, none of these thousands of prisoners has ever been charged or tried, or given access to a lawyer. Their families are not informed of their whereabouts, and in many cases never hear from their relative again.

The secrecy with which these prisoners are detained makes them particularly vulnerable to torture, ill-treatment or unlawful killing. Many are reported to have died inside the prisons. Torture and other forms of ill-treatment are commonplace for the purposes of punishment, interrogation and coercion.

Detention conditions are appalling and in themselves amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Detainees are frequently held in underground cells or in metal shipping containers, often in desert locations and therefore subject to extremes of heat and cold. Food, water and sanitation are scarce.

On the 20th anniversary of independence Eritrea is a country in which human rights are systematically violated. Amnesty International urges President Isaias Afewerki to:

- release all prisoners of conscience arrested for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, opinion, association or religion, or their identity as family members of defectors
- charge anyone suspected of a crime with a recognizable criminal offence or else immediately release them
- immediately confirm the whereabouts and health status of all prisoners and provide all detainees with immediate access to medical care where necessary
- end the use of torture

Arrests and detentions

These thousands of arrests are illustrative of an absolute intolerance of dissent on the part of the government and President Isaias Afewerki – dissent in the form of actual or suspected criticism of the

government – including discussions of reform and human rights issues; but also dissent in the form of anyone who does not comply with the restrictive system imposed by the state – including restrictions on freedom of religion and the requirement of indefinite national service conscription, or anyone who rejects the system by trying to flee the country.

It is impossible to know exactly how many prisoners of conscience and political prisoners are currently being or have previously been arbitrarily detained in Eritrea. However, the number is at least ten thousand.

Detainees

Political prisoners and prisoners of conscience

The Eritrean government and particularly President Isaias Afewerki, does not tolerate any dissent, even from senior members of the government. The ruling party cannot question government policy. Only one political party – the ruling People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) – is permitted, and, since 2001, there is no independent media to scrutinise the government’s actions.

Many of the architects of Eritrea’s independence languish in isolation cells for trying to exercise the rights laid out in their new country’s never-implemented Constitution. Alongside them are thousands of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners. Hundreds of people have been arrested for actual or suspected dissent or opposition to the government. These include senior members of the government, judges, former independence fighters and employees of non-governmental organisations, along with countless others. The longest case of detention known to Amnesty International is that of Mohamed Meranet, a Judge in the city of Keren who was arrested on 17 July 1991 – shortly after Eritrea’s de facto independence from Ethiopia. Although no reason was given for his arrest, unofficial reports suggest he was suspected of relations with the Ethiopian government. Mohamed Meranet has spent over 22 years in arbitrary detention – without charge, trial, judicial review or access to a lawyer. His family have heard no news of him in that time.

The G15 – a group of high profile politicians - have been held incommunicado in secret arbitrary detention since September 2001 when they were arrested after writing an open letter to members of the ruling party calling for reform and democratic dialogue.

Businessman Senay Kifleyasus was arrested in October 2011, and continues to be detained arbitrarily in an unknown location. No reason was given to Senay’s family for his arrest, but it is believed to be in relation to an un-redacted Wikileaks cable, in which a man fitting Senay’s identity is reported to have criticised President Isaias “disastrous governance of the country.”

More recently, at least 187 people have been arrested, and are detained in unknown locations, since an incident on 21 January 2013 when a group of 200 soldiers occupied the Ministry of Information in central Asmara, and broadcast an announcement calling for the release of all political prisoners and the implementation of the 1997 Constitution. Those arrested include a number of people in high profile positions within the authorities, including Abdullah Jaber, Head of the Department of Organizational Affairs of the ruling party, Ibrahim Toteel, the governor of the North Red Sea region, Mustafa Nurhussein, governor of the Southern region, and Ahmed Alhag, the Minister for Mining. It is not known where any of these people are currently being held. Given the secrecy around their detention – as with all political prisoners in Eritrea – and the nature of their acts of dissent, this group are considered to be at extreme risk of torture or other forms of ill-treatment.

Journalists

On 19 September 2001 the Eritrean government closed down the independent press and arrested ten journalists. All ten have remained in secret, incommunicado, arbitrary detention – without charge or trial - since that time. According to unconfirmed reports, a number of the group have died in detention.

Since then, the country has had no press freedom. Nevertheless, journalists employed by state media

continue to be arrested.

One journalist arrested before the September 2001 crackdown is still detained without charge or trial. Gebrehiwot Keleta, a 49 year old reporter working on the newspaper Tsegenay was arrested in June 2000 after he and other journalists met a US embassy official.

In February 2009 the entire staff of Radio Bana – a station broadcasting educational programs under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Education – were arrested. The majority were subsequently released, but a number of them remain in detention without charge or trial.

Religious practitioners

In the 20 years since Eritrea became independent, thousands of religious practitioners have been arrested for exercising their right to freedom of religion.

In 2002, the government withdrew the registration of minority religious groups, and ordered all unregistered religions to register, to provide details of their members and finances, and to close their places of worship until they were registered. Subsequently, only four religions – Islam, and the Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran churches – have been officially recognised. Since then, thousands of people have been arbitrarily detained for practising a religion not sanctioned by the state. Religious detainees are subjected to torture and coercion to force them to recant their faith.

Christian groups estimate that there are between 2,000 and 3,000 Christians in arbitrary detention in Eritrea. Over a hundred have reportedly been arrested between January and April 2013.

People evading national service

Since 1995 thousands of people in Eritrea have been arrested and detained for attempting to escape the prospect of indefinite conscription into national service.

Active national service is compulsory for all citizens between the ages of 18 to 40. The initial national service period is 18 months, generally consisting of six months' military service followed by 12 months' deployment in military or government service. However, this period is often extended indefinitely. Much of the adult population of Eritrea is currently engaged in mandatory national service, many of whom have been conscripted for over ten years. Unconfirmed reports suggest that in some cases children younger than 17 are conscripted.

National service conscripts are assigned as forced labour in state and private projects and enterprises. The basic level national service salary is 450 Nakfa (approximately 30 US\$) per month.

There is a high rate of desertion from national service, despite great risk of capture and subsequent severe punishment. Draft evaders or deserters are arbitrarily detained, without charge or trial, often for periods of one to two years. Upon release they are compelled to return to their national service post.

People fleeing the country

The restrictions and violations of basic rights and freedoms, the prospect of indefinite conscription in national service and the severely limited employment and educational opportunities, cause thousands of Eritreans to attempt to flee the country every month. However, this too is an act which is met with arbitrary arrest and detention if the person is caught. Countless people have been detained arbitrarily after being caught attempting to cross the border. Periods of detention of one or two years are frequently reported.

Family members of deserters and defectors

Families of those who flee the country face reprisals, including potential imprisonment as punishment for their relative abandoning the regime and evading national service. The Eritrean government has arrested

numerous relatives of those who have deserted or avoided conscription, if they were unable to pay substantial fines.

Prison conditions

There is an extensive network of places of detention in Eritrea. Large prison facilities, smaller high security prisons, prisons within military camps, and police stations are used to hold prisoners of conscience and political prisoners for prolonged periods.

Some places of detention are well-known, some are secret, some were specifically built for purpose, some are make-shift. The exact number of detention centres in Eritrea is unknown. Some estimates put the number at over 200.

The military, military intelligence and police all have their own prisons. Each army division has its own prisons, some of which are in military camps, some in other locations. Detention centres in the military camps of Sawa, Me'eter, Mai Serwa and Wi'a are regularly reported to hold prisoners detained for practising their faith, evading national service or attempting to flee the country, as well as prisoners detained for alleged infractions during national service, for example practising a banned religion, insubordination or attempting to desert. The National Security Service is reported to have a number of prisons throughout the country, including at least three in Asmara. National Security is also alleged to use civilian buildings as prisons in some locations. Many politicians, journalists and religious leaders are believed to be detained in high security prisons, including Eiraeiro, north of the Asmara-Massawa road, and Karchele in Asmara. High profile prisoners are held incommunicado in unknown locations.

Numerous detention centres use underground cells and metal shipping containers to hold prisoners. Many of these detention centres are in desert locations and experience extremes of both high and low temperatures, meaning that underground cells and metal shipping containers suffer extreme heat during the day and extreme cold during the night. Metal containers magnify the extreme temperatures experienced in many detention locations, and become suffocatingly hot during the day, and severely cold at night. Temperatures can be so extreme in these conditions that prisoners cannot sit or lie down without blistering their skin.

Underground cells, and shipping containers are usually unventilated, the prisoners are denied access to daylight. The cells have no sanitation facilities and prisoners are only allowed out for very short periods for toilet purposes, once or twice a day, according to numerous testimonies from former detainees.

Detainees receive limited food, of poor quality, and limited drinking water, despite the high temperatures in many detention locations. Former detainees also report that the water they are given is often unclean. Illness and disease are reported to be widespread. Severe over-crowding is frequently reported from most places of detention.

Amnesty International has received many reports of deaths in detention, as a result of torture, appalling conditions or suicide. These include accounts of prisoners dying of treatable diseases such as malaria, and illnesses caused by excessive heat, inadequate food and sanitation. There is no transparency, and no process of officially informing families of the death of a relative in detention. Most families have no idea if their relative is still alive. However, occasionally information is leaked through friendly guards, by bribery, due to hospital admissions or from released prisoners. The government of Eritrea continually refuses to confirm or deny these reports, or to provide information on the whereabouts or health of prisoners.

Torture and ill treatment

Torture and other forms of ill-treatment are commonplace for the purposes of punishment, interrogation and coercion. A frequently reported method of punishment involves prisoners being tied with ropes in painful positions for extended periods. Often the prisoner, while tied, is left exposed to the sun for long periods of time. One of the most frequently reported positions is the 'helicopter', where the hands and feet of the victim are tied behind the back whilst lying on the ground face down outside in desert sun, in

rain or freezing cold desert nights. This is a punishment allocated for a particular number of days, the maximum reported being 55 days in the Dahlak Kebir island prison, but it is more often for one or two weeks. The prisoner is tied in this position 24 hours a day, except for two or three short breaks for meals and toilet functions.

Other forms of tying are also reported to be regularly used. Many former prisoners have reported having their elbows tied together tightly behind their back, or seeing this done to other prisoners. One man told Amnesty International how he had seen a fellow prisoner and friend lose one of his hands after being tied in this way.

Another often reported method is forcing detainees to walk over sharp objects barefoot or to roll on the ground, over sharp stones and rough terrain. Sometimes prisoners are forced to strip naked before doing so.

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