

**Religious Persecution in Eritrea – 2018 Report - for Oral evidence for Review into FCO
Support for Persecuted Christians by Revd Dr Berhane Asmelash; Director of Release
Eritrea**

Background information

Release Eritrea is a human rights organisation founded in 2004 by concerned Eritreans in the UK. It is registered with the Charities Commission and governed by a Board of Trustees.

Eritrea regularly tops the list of world's most repressive regimes. The country is led by, Issias Afworki, a former freedom fighter, who has been leading the country without a single formal election since independence in 1993. The National Constitution, formally adopted by the National Assembly in the late 1990s, remains unimplemented, government critics are not tolerated, and political opposition harshly punished.

In 2001, several high-ranking military officers and ministers were arrested for demanding reform. Seventeen years on, they remain in prison with some reported dead. In the same year, freedom of the press was banned, journalists arrested, and many remain in undisclosed prisons. This was followed by cancellation of planned elections and in February 2002 the National Assembly was adjourned indefinitely and the country has since been led by arbitrary presidential decree.

In May 2002, the government ordered all Evangelical and Pentecostal churches to be closed. The list of banned faith groups includes Baptists, Methodists, the 7th day Adventists, Pentecostals and some Orthodox renewal movements. Following the closure of churches, the church leaders and members were rounded up, individually and in groups; from their homes, the streets, their offices and public gatherings such as weddings and even funerals.

Today in Eritrea, Christians are being persecuted - not only for their Christian faith but also for their identity as Christians. Christians in Eritrea are subjected to gross abuses and inhumane treatment that includes:

Discrimination

Evangelical Christians have been discriminated at every level of society. If anyone is identified as a member of the outlawed group, he/she can lose their jobs. Some have lost their business and their bank accounts frozen.

Grotesque Prison Conditions

In Eritrea, a prison can be anything and anywhere; underground pits, metal shipping containers, holes in the ground, military barracks, open air prisons, police stations, and private villas. Prisoners are not allowed visits, no legal representation, minimal medical care and inadequate sanitation facilities. Most prisoners are subjected to hard labour such as digging

quarries, carrying heavy stones and rocks, working in government owned farms, mines, factories and loading and unloading military supplies.

Torture is frequent. It comprises of beatings; prisoners being tied up by both hands and legs and hanged from trees for several hours and sometimes days. There are several forms of hanging from trees, “Jesus” - a crucifix like, “Helicopter”, “number eight” and “Alamz. We have several reports that many prisoners who have been disabled as a result of this abuse or who lost their lives while being tortured in Eritrean prisons. Among them is a Christian named Kelete (in his mid-sixties and a father of seven) who sustained a head injury and died shortly after his release. Azieb, an evangelist was arrested at a wedding and sent to Wia prison, where she died in the hands of her tormentors (July 2008).

Starvation: prisoners are subjected to starvation and poor hygiene; several prisoners have lost their lives. The bread is very hard and sometimes no stew/soup is provided. Since most prisoners suffer from poor dental hygiene, they find it difficult to eat the dry bread, it is not hard to imagine the consequential starvation. It is reported that several prisoners have died due to starvation in Assab prison.

Rape: rape is a common occurrence perpetrated by prison officers on female prisoners. I heard several reports from released prisoners that had experienced sexual violence whilst in prison.

The exact number of religious prisoners in Eritrea is not available since there is a constant wave of unknown number of arrests and releases. The following church leaders have been in prison for over fourteen years:

List of some long-term prisoners:

Dr Kiflu Ghebremeskel, a Professor of Mathematics and a Full Gospel Church Pastor has been in prison since 2004 when he was taken from home. Kiflu has not seen his wife and their three children for over fourteen years.

Haile Niazghi, an Accountant and a Full Gospel Church General Secretary was arrested in May 2004 and remains in prison. Haile is a father of three and he has not seen his family since his imprisonment.

Pastor Kidane Weldu, a Full Gospel Pastor and was arrested in March 2005. Kidane suffers from poor health and has not seen his wife and four children since he was arrested.

Dr Tekleab Mengisteab, a medical doctor and an ordained priest in the Orthodox church of Eritrea (which is one of the four religious organisations officially allowed to operate in Eritrea). Tekleab is diabetic and suffers from other illnesses as a result. Tekleab is a father of three and he has not seen his family since his arrest in November 2004.

Dr Fitsum Ghebrenigus, a Psychiatrist and an ordained priest in the Orthodox Church of Eritrea. He was arrested in November 2004. Fitsum was a hard-working Psychiatrist, who was diligently working to promote a good standard of mental health service in Eritrea. When Fitsum was arrested he was the only Psychiatrist in the whole country. While he was in prison, Fitsum lost his wife but he was not allowed to attend her funeral. Fitsum also lost his father and again he was not allowed to attend his father's funeral. Fitsum has a son whom he has not seen since his imprisonment.

Revd Gebre-Medhin Gebre-Giorgis, a Theologian and a youth leader within the Orthodox Church, arrested in November 2004. Gebremedhin and the above two Orthodox priests were leading the renewal youth movements within the Orthodox church.

Aregaheign Weldelassie: arrested in October 2006. Aregaheign is an Eritrea-American citizen and an Evangelical mission leader. It is believed, Aregaheign is in Wenjel Mirmira, Asmara prison. He has never been seen by anyone since his arrest in 2006.

Pastor Mussie Ezaz was arrested in September 2007, Mussie is the father of three boys and is believed to be in Wenjel Mirmira prison, Asmara. Mussie has not been seen by any member of his family since his arrest in 2007.

Mussie Eyob: Mussie was arrested in 2011 in Saudi Arabia for preaching to Muslims in Jeddah. Initially, Mussie was sentenced to death, but with pressure from the international community, he was deported to Eritrea. On arrival, Mussie was taken by Eritrean security from Asmara Airport and imprisoned. Mussie is currently in Mai Serewa prison in the suburbs of Asmara.

Twen Theodros: Twen was arrested in 2005 while celebrating New Year. She was 22 years old when she was arrested. Twen has been in a number of prisons since her arrest; including Wi'a, near the Red sea coast, Me'etr in North West Eritrea and currently she is in Mai Serewa, which is said to be relatively better than her previous prisons.

Wubet Yemane: She was arrested in 2006. Wubet was 16 years old when she was arrested. Like Twen, Wubet has been in several prisons. In Mai Serewa, Wi'a, Mi'etr and currently, she is in Mai Serewa prison.

Tighisti Muqur: She was arrested in 2006, and she is still in prison. Tighisti is a former Eritrean freedom fighter with the EPLF. She is a mother of two. Tighisti was briefly released a few years ago for health reasons, but she was rearrested two months later and remains in prison. She is currently in Mai Serewa prison.

Zeray: He is a secondary school teacher. Zeray was arrested in 2007 and he is still in prison. He is believed to be in Mai Serewa prison.

In 2005, the Orthodox Patriarch, Abune Anthonios, asked the government to release the above-named clergymen and condemned the closures of the Orthodox youth assembly halls. However, the Patriarch's pleas fell on deaf ears. In fact, the stance he took towards Christian

persecution cost him his position as a Patriarch of the Church. He was put under house arrest, where he remains to date. Abune Anthonos is 92 years old and currently he is in poor health.

None of these Christians and church leaders have ever been brought to justice nor officially charged. They remain in high security prisons - incommunicado, where they are regularly subjected to torture, starvation, hard labour and interrogation.

In May 2017, the Eritrean security service raided homes in Adi Quala, Asmara, Ginda, Massawa, Nefasit, A'la and arrested over 200 Christians. Some of the prisoners have been released after being forced to recant their faith and "reconvert to their parents' faiths", but several of them are still in prison. About 66 prisoners were sent to a prison in the harsh Dahlak Islands. They have not been heard from since. Family members are worried about their wellbeing. Many children have been left without parents or guardians. One prisoner, Fitsum Temelso was taken from Massawa to Dahlak prison, Fitsum died while in custody and his body was given to his wife in Massawa. Fitsum was a father of three.

Some prisoners are in Metkel Abiot - a desert prison along the Red Sea coast. One of the prisoners Fekadu, a mother of four was taken from her home in Adi Quala and was sent to Metkel Abiot and died two months later due to lack of medicine and hygiene. Her husband and 17-year old son were also in prison at the time that she passed away. But they were not told of her death nor allowed to attend her funeral. Fikadu's husband, Afeworki and their four children, have since left the country and are now living as refugees.

Assab Prison is one of the most notorious prisons in Eritrea. In a 2018 visit to a refugee camp in Ethiopia, I had the opportunity to speak with several Eritreans who have been in prison for their faith. One of them was Yemane. Yemane was arrested in 2013 for his religious affiliation with one of the banned religious groups. He was sent to Assab, where he was locked up in prison for three years. During his three years imprisonment, he experienced and witnessed some of the most inhuman treatment one can ever imagine. It includes torture, starvation, hard labour and solitary confinement. Yemane was sent to solitary confinement for sharing his faith with some of the prisoners. He told me one of his cell-mates was executed when he accepted Christianity as a faith. His name is Mogos Hidray. Due to solitary confinement, heat exhaustion and limited water supply, Yemane had a heat stroke. As a result, Yemane cannot walk without a walking-frame; his movement is permanently restricted and his speech impaired. Yemane eventually went into a coma and was then released to die at home. He regained consciousness a few weeks after his release. He was taken to Sudan for medical treatment and then to Ethiopia, where he is residing as a refugee.

The most recent report of mass arrests we received was on January 9, 2019. Fifteen people were arrested, while attending a home fellowship in a fellow Christian's home in Asmara, Setanta Otto district. All the prisoners were sent to the 5th police station in Asmara. Four of

the prisoners were released (women with children) during the first week of their arrest and others were released weeks later.

We have a list of more than 230 religious' prisoners in Eritrea. However, this is a tip of the iceberg and we fear that a large number of religious prisoners languish in unidentified torture chambers and prisons scattered across the country. We are particularly concerned about young people in the indefinite national service, where each military command runs their own prison regime and cells, we don't have information about the number of such prisoners or their condition but reports from those that have escaped and are seeking asylum report that a large number do indeed get persecuted and arrested for their faith and no one is allowed to practise their religion openly.

Dr Berhane Asmelash (Director)

Release Eritrea

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Recommendations

1. The UK to use its diplomatic links with Eritrea to advocate for religious rights in the country and in particular for the release of the long-term prisoners including the patriarch of the Orthodox Church
2. The UK to urge Eritrea to implement the ratified constitution which enshrines provision for respect to basic human rights including the rights to freedom of religious worship
3. The UK to urge Eritrean authorities to take measures to stop all forms of religious rights violations and lift the ban on Christian groups that have been banned from operating since 2002
4. A UK delegation to be allowed to visit the detained Patriarch and other church leaders under arrest to assess their situation and update the information available on them
5. The UK to offer protection to victims of religious persecution who have escaped the country and are languishing in refugee camps and detention centres including in Libya where they are exploited by human traffickers

Q&As

Q: What was the situation before 2001 like for Christians?

A: There have always been restrictions but pre-1997 it was OK. When the Constitution was drafted freedom of speech was secured. Most people supported it except for the President who refused to implement it. Between 1997 and 2001 there were sporadic arrests of Christians, but always restricted to small towns. Then the war started against Ethiopia and this was a distraction. 100,000 people lost their lives in a futile war. Ministers themselves refused to meet and they then asked for reform but were arrested and imprisoned. This then spread to the Church - Catholic/Orthodox. All who were very active in their faith were imprisoned – Catholics, Orthodox, Evangelical. Lutherans were allowed to continue to worship, but some active church leaders and members were arrested. There was also persecution of Muslims, but mosques still remained open and ordinary Muslims were not penalised. A lot of Orthodox priests spent months in jail. Jehovah Witnesses and a very small number of Bahai's were also targeted.

The government were fighting any independent mindsets.

They used to deny that prisoners exist. But now it is more difficult to say this as the peace with Ethiopia has led to an open border and people are 'free' to leave. Not legally but no one is patrolling the border.

Q: What percentage of Christians are amongst those fleeing Eritrea?

A: About 10% of refugees from Eritrea cared for in Ethiopia or elsewhere are evangelical Christians. There have been refugee camps in Ethiopia since 2004. They are well received and no abuse that I know of (the situation in Sudan is worse). The UK do apply pressure, although it is not easy. President had allies in the past in Mugabe and Gaddafi and with Bashir. He has now swapped Qatar and Iran connections for a Saudi/UAE alignment and allows them to use their bases to bomb Yemen and PoW camps.

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