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ERITREA: Gospel singer Helen Berhane released

Amnesty International welcomes the release a few days ago of Eritrean gospel singer Helen Berhane, who had been detained incommunicado without charge or trial for two and a half years at Mai Serwa army camp.

Helen Berhane was among 2,000 detained members of banned evangelical churches in Eritrea, including her own Rema church, which has been subjected to sustained persecution by the Eritrean government in the last four years.

She spent most of her detention in inhuman and degrading conditions inside a metal shipping container which was used as a prison cell. The authorities reportedly tortured her many times to make her recant her faith. In October 2006, she was admitted to hospital in Asmara as a result of new beatings. She was released in late October but is said to be confined to a wheelchair due to the injuries she sustained to her feet and legs. She refused to abandon her faith despite the threats and ill-treatment.

Amnesty International urges the Government of Eritrea to respect its Constitution and its obligations under international law to respect freedom of religion and freedom against arbitrary and incommunicado detention, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of prisoners.

Notwithstanding Helen Berhane's release, Amnesty International remains concerned that the systematic persecution of people on the basis of their religion continues unabated in Eritrea.

On 15-16 October 2006, over 150 men, women and children, members of the Kale Hiwot (Word of God) Church, the Full Gospel Church, the Church of the Living God and the Rema Church, were arrested at their homes in Mendefera town, 50 km south of the capital Asmara. Twelve members of the Rema church were also arrested in Adi-Quala town, further south, for worshipping in a private home. Two of them, Immanuel Andegergesh (m) and Kibrom Firemichael (m), reportedly died in a nearby army camp as a result of torture.

In addition, there are scores of members of other faith groups who have been kept in indefinite and incommunicado detention without charge or trial. They include three Jehovah's Witnesses detained for 12 years for refusing military service, and dozens of members of dissenting groups of the official Orthodox Church and Muslim Council.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since 2002, only the Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran Christian churches and Islam have been allowed to operate in Eritrea. Members of some 35 minority Christian evangelical churches face fierce persecution, even though freedom of religion is guaranteed in the Eritrean Constitution. An estimated 2,000 members of minority churches, including about 20 pastors, are currently detained. Detainees are held incommunicado in harsh conditions without charge or trial. They are imprisoned in police stations at first,

then in army camps and security prisons in different parts of the country, including the main military training centre at Sawa. Some are held in metal shipping containers and underground prisons. Several detainees have become seriously ill and are rarely provided with adequate medical treatment. They are repeatedly tortured by being beaten and being tied up in painful positions, in an effort to make them cease worshipping and recant their faith.