

PUBLIC

AI Index: AFR 64/001/2006

17 February 2006

UA 40/06 Fear of Torture or ill-treatment/ Prisoners of Conscience

ERITREA 75 evangelical Christians (37 female, 38 male)

Seventy-five military conscripts who are evangelical Christians were reportedly detained on 1 February at the main military training centre at Sawa near the western border with Sudan, for praying and reading bibles. They are held incommunicado without charge and are at risk of torture or ill-treatment. Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their religious beliefs.

Detentions of military conscripts take place arbitrarily and without reference to military law, since military courts are not convened in Eritrea. National military service has been compulsory since 1994 for all Eritreans aged between 18 and 40 years, although the upper age limit for female conscription has reportedly been reduced to 27 years. In practice, the period of service for conscripts is indefinite. Members of banned evangelical churches in Eritrea's conscript army are not permitted to practise their faith, meet together or worship, possess religious publications or receive pastoral care from a minister of their faith. Prior to these new arrests, over 150 conscripts were believed to be detained on these grounds.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In 2002, the government ordered all unregistered religions to close their places of worship and stop practising their faith until they were registered. Only the Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran churches and Islam were officially recognized. Since then no minority religious group has succeeded in obtaining registration. Members of over 35 Christian evangelical churches have faced severe persecution in the last three years, with over 30 pastors and over 1,750 church members currently detained, mostly in military custody, and their churches all shut down.

In its report of December 2005, "Eritrea: Religious Persecution" (AI Index: AFR 64/013/2005), Amnesty International documented 45 incidents of religious persecution since 2003. The government denied religious persecution and the Acting Minister of Information, Ali Abdu Ahmed, was quoted by the Reuters news agency as saying "Who are these Amnesty International people? We cannot run every day after such unsubstantiated fabrications."

In mid-December 2005, some dozens of pastors and leaders of the Rema, Full Gospel, Philadelphia, and Hallelujah evangelical churches were detained in the city of Asmara. Police searching for a pastor from the evangelical Church of the Living God detained members of the Church's board instead. Music shops selling evangelical church materials and audiotapes were closed down and staff and customers arrested. In February 2006, the Patriarch (leader) of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, *Abune* Antonios, was placed under virtual house arrest, after being dismissed from office by the church synod (assembly). His dismissal was reportedly instigated by the government, after he had complained of government interference in church affairs and called for the release of three detained Orthodox priests.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- expressing concern for the safety of evangelical church members detained at Sawa military centre, who were reportedly arrested on account of their religious beliefs;

- calling for them to be released immediately and unconditionally, as they are prisoners of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of religion, which is guaranteed in the Eritrean Constitution;
- asking the authorities to ensure that they are not tortured or ill-treated in custody, and are given immediate access to their families, lawyers and any medical attention they may require;
- expressing concern that they have been arbitrarily detained without charge or trial, contrary to human rights provisions in the Eritrean Constitution and laws, which require that people are brought before a court within 48 hours of their arrest;
- appealing for the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience imprisoned for practising their religion.

APPEALS TO:

President

His Excellency President Issayas Afewerki

Office of the President

P O Box 257, Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 123 788 (via Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

Salutation: Your Excellency

Ms Fawzia Hashim

Minister of Justice

Ministry of Justice

P O Box 241, Asmara, Eritrea

Salutation: Dear Minister

Fax: +2911 126 422

General Sebhat Ephrem

Minister of Defence

Ministry of Defence

P O Box 629, Asmara, Eritrea

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

Mr Semere Beyene

Director, Department of Religious Affairs

Ministry of Local Government

P O Box 225, Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: +2911 120 014

and to diplomatic representatives of Eritrea accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 31 March 2006.