

UA 241/01

Fear for safety/possible prisoners of conscience/ freedom of expression

20 September 2001

ERITREA

Petros Solomon [m]
Ogbe Abraha [m]
Haile Woldetensae [m]
Mahmud Ahmed Sheriffo [m]
Berhane Ghebre Eghzabiher [m]
Saleh Kekiya [m]
Aster Fishatsion [m]
Hamid Hamid [m]
Germano Nati [m]
Estifanos Seyoum [m]
Beraki Ghebre Selassie [m]

and possibly 60 others

Eleven former senior Eritrean government officials were arrested in Asmara, the Eritrean capital, on 18 and 19 September 2001. Their whereabouts are currently unknown and Amnesty International fears for their safety. Prisoners in Eritrea are routinely held in harsh conditions. The government has reportedly announced that the 11, who have recently been openly critical of Eritrean government policies, have been detained "because of crimes committed against the nation's security and sovereignty." Amnesty International considers that they may be prisoners of conscience detained solely for the peaceful expression of their political concerns.

The 11, named above, are part of a group of 15 senior officials who have over recent months been publicly critical of government policies. One of the 15 has subsequently recanted and the other three are reportedly currently out of the country. Amnesty International fears that they could be arrested if they returned to Eritrea.

There are also fears that around 60 of their supporters may have been arrested as well. All those arrested should be promptly brought to court, charged with a recognizably criminal offence or released. Any trial should be held in accordance with international human rights standards and without recourse to the death penalty. The organization would be concerned if the detainees were charged and brought to trial before the Special Court, which fails to meet international standards for fair trial. The Court conducts trials behind closed doors and allows no right to defence counsel or of appeal to a higher or independent court.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In May 2001, the group of 15 senior officials of the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) party wrote an open letter to party members, in which they criticized the government for acting in an "illegal and unconstitutional" manner and called upon "all PFDJ members and the Eritrean people in general to express their opinion through legal and democratic means and to give their support to the goals and principles they consider just."

Amnesty International is concerned about the ban on the Eritrean private press imposed by the government from 19 September for "not abiding by the press law". The government has reportedly stated that all independent newspapers have been suspended because they had "put at risk the unity and interest of the country" and that those newspapers that were deemed to have abided by the press laws would be allowed to reopen. The independent press has become more critical of government policies over the last few months and in particular some newspapers reported the open letter from the 15 PFDJ members.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English

- expressing concern that those arrested are detained incommunicado and urging the authorities to release them
- calling on the authorities either to charge them with a recognizably criminal offence or to release them
- urging the authorities to guarantee that none of those detained will be ill-treated
- calling on the authorities to allow those detained immediate access to lawyers of their own choice
- expressing concern at the suspension of the independent press, stating that these actions violate the right to freedom of expression and to hamper their legitimate work as journalists.

APPEALS TO:

President Issayas Afewerki
Office of the President
PO Box 257
Asmara, Eritrea

Telegrams: President Issayas Afewerki, Asmara, Eritrea

Faxes: + 291 1 125123

Salutation: Your Excellency

Mrs Fawzia Hashim
Minister of Justice
Ministry of Justice
PO Box 241
Asmara, Eritrea

Telegrams: Justice Minister, Asmara, Eritrea

Faxes: + 291 1 126422

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Eritrea accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat or your secretariat for appeals after 1 November 2001.