

UA 107/02

Fear for safety

8 April 2002

ERITREA

Yosef Mohamed Ali (m), chief editor, *Tsigenay*
Amanuel Asrat (m), chief editor, *Zemen*
Seyoum Tsehaye (m), freelance editor/photographer, former
director of Eritrean state television
Temesgen Gebreyesus (m), reporter, *Keste Debena*
Mattewos Habteab (m), editor, *Meqaleh*
Dawit Habtemichael (m), assistant chief editor, *Meqaleh*
Medhanie Haile (m), assistant chief editor, *Keste Debena*
Dawit Isaac (m), reporter, *Setit* (Swedish citizen)
Fessahaye Yohannes ("Joshua") (m), reporter, *Setit*
Said Abdulkadir (m), chief editor, *Admas*

The 10 journalists named above have been detained incommunicado without charge or trial since 18 September 2001, when the independent newspapers they work for were shut down by the government. On 31 March 2002 they began a hunger strike, demanding a fair trial before an independent court. Three days later they were taken from the police station where they were held, and nine were moved to undisclosed places of detention, where they are at grave risk of ill-treatment.

They were detained because they published articles critical of the government. Amnesty International considers them prisoners of conscience, imprisoned solely because of their legitimate work as journalists.

They had been held at the 1st police station in the capital, Asmara. When they began their hunger strike, the authorities allegedly refused them water. They were reportedly taken away from the police station in two groups by security and police officers. Swedish citizen Dawit Isaac, who recently had surgery, was taken to hospital.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Independent newspapers have been allowed to operate alongside the state media since 1997, under tight restrictions imposed by the Press Law. In the past two years, several journalists who have written articles critical of the government have been arrested, charged with libel, or conscripted into the army during the recent war with Ethiopia.

Between them these 10 journalists worked for all eight of Eritrea's independent newspapers, which were closed down when they were arrested. At the same time, 11 prominent members of the ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) party, including three former Foreign Ministers, were arrested. They had published an open letter to President Issayas Afewerki in May 2001 calling for democratic reform and human rights improvements. Their whereabouts have still not been disclosed, and in February President Issayas Afewerki accused them of treason in the National Assembly.

The eight independent newspapers had published interviews and commentaries on the debate developing from the open letter. Several other journalists have fled the country following these arrests.

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

- expressing concern for the safety of the ten journalists named above while they are held in secret detention;
- calling on the authorities to say where they are held and allow them access to their families, legal representatives and doctors of their choosing;
- asking for assurances that they will not be ill-treated or force-fed to make them end their hunger strike;
- calling for them to be released immediately and unconditionally, as prisoners of conscience who have not used or advocated violence.

APPEALS TO:

His Excellency Issayas Afewerki
President of Eritrea
Office of the President
P O Box 257, Asmara, Eritrea

Salutation: Dear President

Fax: + 2911 125123

Brigadier-General Mussa Raba
Commissioner of Police
Ministry of Internal Affairs
P O Box 1223, Asmara, Eritrea

Salutation: Dear Commissioner

Fax: +2911 122135

COPIES TO:

Mr Naizghi Kiflu
Minister of Information and Culture
Ministry of Information and Culture
P O Box 242, Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 291 1 124647

Ms Fawzia Hashim
Minister of Justice
Ministry of Justice
P O Box 241, Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 291 1 126422

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 20 May 2002.