

PUBLIC

AI Index: AFR 64/010/2003

27 November 2003

Further Information on UA 269/03 (AFR 64/006/2003, 18 September 2003) Incommunicado detention / Prisoners of Conscience / Ill-treatment

ERITREA **6 male and female students - members of minority Christian churches**

Released: **51 male and female students- members of minority Christian churches**

Fifty-one young male and female members of minority Christian churches who had been held in metal shipping containers at Sawa military camp in western Eritrea have reportedly been released. They were arrested in mid-August and held incommunicado in harsh conditions, which amounted to torture or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

Six of the school students are still detained in Sawa military barracks. They are said to be held incommunicado in underground cells, and have not been taken to any court or charged with any offence. They were arrested for possessing bibles and were being forced to abandon their faith.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Religious persecution is officially prohibited by the laws and Constitution of Eritrea, and the government professes to respect religious freedom, but hundreds of members of minority Christian churches have been arbitrarily detained and ill-treated during 2003.

Over 330 people including over 80 female and male army conscripts are currently being held. This followed a government order in May 2002 for all faith groups other than the four main religions – the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Islam, the Eritrean Evangelical (Lutheran) Church and the Roman Catholic Church – to close down and apply for official registration, including giving details of their membership and any foreign funding.

The government's attack on the minority churches, which are mostly part of an evangelical revival movement in recent years, appears to be part of general repression of the rights to freedom of opinion and belief. These churches, however, have no known political involvement or links with prominent political personalities and journalists currently detained as prisoners of conscience for calling for democratic reforms.

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

- renewing appeals for the immediate and unconditional release of the remaining six school students who are prisoners of conscience at Sawa Military Barracks;
- welcoming reports of the release of the other 51 school students;
- asking for official information on what happened to them, whether they are now back at their schools and allowed to practise their religion or conscripted in the army;
- calling for the authorities to respect the students' right to religious freedom guaranteed by the Constitution and laws of Eritrea, as well as international treaties which Eritrea has signed, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;
- expressing concern at the harsh treatment of these prisoners, first held in metal shipping containers and now said to be in solitary confinement in undergrounds cells.

APPEALS TO: (It may be difficult to get through to faxes in Eritrea, but please keep trying)

President of the State of Eritrea

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

Fax: + 2911 125123

Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Justice

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

Fax: + 2911 126422

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

Head of Security

Brigadier General Abraha Kassa
Office of the President
P O Box 257
Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 125123

Salutation: Dear Brigadier General

Director, Department of Religious Affairs

Mr Semere Beyene
Office of the President
P O Box 257
Asmara, Eritrea

Fax: + 2911 125 123

Salutation: Dear Sir

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 9 January 2004.