

briefing

Eritrea

'The plight of prisoners in Eritrea' Evidence presented to the Conservative Party Commission on Human Rights

FOR PUBLIC USE

12 JULY 2006



CHRISTIAN
SOLIDARITY
WORLDWIDE
VOICE FOR THE VOICELESS

PO Box 99, New Malden,
Surrey KT3 3YF

T: 0845 456 5464

E: admin@csw.org.uk

W: www.csw.org.uk

REGISTERED CHARITY NO. 281836

July 12 2006

Any impartial observer of events in Eritrea since 1994 cannot escape the sad conclusion that a young, vibrant democracy has degenerated in a matter of few years and from a promising start into one of the most repressive regimes in Africa. Moreover, and I say this with sadness as an African, once more a venerated and esteemed freedom fighter has transformed himself, as one Eritrean remarked, from the Che Guevara of Eritrea into one of the greatest dictators on the continent.

Several thousand people are currently believed to be detained in Eritrea. As Mr. Joseph intimated earlier, life in Eritrea is increasingly characterised by random disappearances, with people being arbitrarily detained without any official notification to their family and friends. In addition, the government also practices what have been described as revolving door arrests, whereby people are detained and released only to be detained again at a later date.

Consequently, the overall number of detainees in Eritrea can only be guessed at. However, what is known from calculations undertaken by sources on the ground in Eritrea and issued to the Christian news agency Compass Direct, is that during a year which began with reports of the creation of a government Task Force charged with eradicating charismatic Christianity in Eritrea, the known number of Christian detainees doubled in November 2005 to 1778 from a previously calculated total of 883 in April of that year. Given the subsequent continuation in the mass arrests of Christians, today the number of detainees may have reached, if not exceeded the 2000 mark. In fact, so severe is religious persecution in Eritrea that during a Congressional hearing on the release of the annual International Religious Freedom Reports in November 2005, US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford described it as among the worst in the world on a per capita basis.

All of these Christians are detained without charge or trial, although it was rumoured that after a year in detention, six church leaders may have been tried in absentia before a special court or military tribunal and sentenced to five year prison terms. Several Christians have been released from detention after agreeing to sign an undertaking to renounce their manner of faith and refrain from church activities that the authorities have deemed illegal. Please note that such signatures have regularly occurred following mistreatment at the hands of the authorities, a point to which I will return later.

Eritrea is currently a mass of detention centres. Prisons are so overcrowded that airport hangars, police stations and other unsuitable accommodation function as long or short term holding cells for the country's burgeoning population of detainees, despite lacking adequate sanitary and other facilities. In addition, many people are detained in army camps, and sources also report the emergence of 'ghost houses' in Asmara, the phenomenon popularised by the northern Sudanese regime whereby seemingly normal homes or villas in otherwise normal neighbourhoods function as torture or detention centres.

Conditions in Eritrea's prisons are notoriously terrible. In the interest of time I have distributed a few recent witness testimonies collected for CSW from Eritrean refugees that give an idea of these conditions, but will briefly highlight a few salient issues.

Firstly, there appears to be a routine use of torture. Prisoners in Eritrea can experience mistreatment ranging from severe assault and exposure to extreme climatic conditions and malaria bearing mosquitoes, to systematic torture. In a report of 2004, Amnesty International detailed several means of torture employed by the Eritrean security services.

Prisoners reported having been tied with ropes for days or weeks in painful positions, such as “the helicopter” (hands and feet tied behind the back, lying face-down on the ground, usually in the open air for up to several weeks), and the “Jesus Christ” (a position resembling crucifixion). There is also the “Number eight” position, which occurs inside a special torture room. The victim is tied up by wrists behind the back and bound with the feet. A stick is then placed under the knees and supported on a framework on both sides horizontally, and the body is turned upside down with the feet exposed. The soles of the feet are then beaten with sticks or whips.

In one of the submitted statements, a prisoner referred to as TK, states that he was tied “either in the eight position... or the helicopter position” once or twice a week. Another, PL, speaks of seeing Christians in Sawa military camp, situated in the mountainous area near the border with Sudan, being tied in the helicopter position and warned not to meet together. We also have reports of people being crippled by such torture, and at least one report of the subsequent death of a layman as a result of injuries sustained under torture.

Prisoners deemed worthy of severe punishment are placed in metal shipping containers, underground cells or two metre by two metre cells known as “shella”. All of these punishment cells lack sanitary provisions, ventilation and lighting. Shipping containers in particular are baking hot by day and freezing cold by night. In an infamous incident of August 2003, and in an effort to force them to abandon their manner of worship, 57 teenagers were held in metal shipping containers after being found with Bibles at their summer military camp. All but six eventually succumbed to these appalling conditions. Another well-known case is that of Helen Berhane, a 31 year old gospel singer arrested in 2004 who has spent most of the last two years in solitary confinement at Sawa military camp, after refusing to sign an undertaking to renounce her manner of worship. A lot of this time has been spent in shipping containers. Helen is currently reported to be in solitary confinement in an underground cell because she continues to speak of her faith when she is amongst the general prison population.

As well as being deprived of their freedom, former Eritrean detainees report being deprived of adequate food and water and access to medical treatment. In February 2005 it was rumoured that Rev. Dr Menghisteb, the detained Orthodox priest referred to briefly in an earlier submission who is an insulin-dependent diabetic, was suffering from hypertension. Later came reports that he had collapsed on at least one occasion and had been taken to hospital after being unable to access his medication. However even at this critical juncture his family were not allowed to visit him and news of his ill health and hospitalisation only reached them when it filtered out through prison and hospital personnel. In another example, when a former prisoner complained of severe toothache, instead of allowing him to receive appropriate attention, his prison guards attempted to remove the tooth using a hammer and chisel. They left a part of it behind, causing severe infection, which they again did not treat. As a result the prisoner was left in such excruciating pain that he was unable to eat for several weeks and nearly died. In his testimony of life at Gedem prison near Massawa, one former prisoner informed Eritrean human rights activist Elsa Chyrum of a young man named Habtom, whose broke his back while undertaking arduous work in the prison. He too received no attention despite being in excruciating pain.

Prisoners are also subjected to forced labour. In fact reports emanating from Eritrea indicate that prisoners are compelled to undertake work in the construction and other sectors. For example, in his submitted testimony, TK reports being set to work digging a mine. Also, in his testimony to Eritrean human rights activist Elsa Chyrum, the man imprisoned in Gedem states that he and other prisoners were obliged to construct a naval base using manual labour, as they were not provided with machinery.

Finally, evidence is also emerging of extrajudicial executions in Eritrean detention centres. The testimony on life in Gedem prison details the execution of a young man who attempted a hopeless escape from this prison. Eritrean refugees, who, as we have heard, currently make up the second highest number of asylum seekers in the UK, regularly relate tales of such executions, but are reluctant to speak out openly for fear of attracting the kind of harassment from government apparatchiks experienced by my co-panellists and others brave enough to go public. It is interesting to note that two potential panellists withdrew once they realised that this would be an open hearing.

Eritrea has become increasingly militarised and repressive. It is a nation interned, or as one commentator has put it, 'a nation under siege by its own government'. While thousands suffer actual imprisonment, for most people life outside of prison is so restricted that they may as well be in one. Society is tightly regulated. Meetings of over seven people, even on a public pavement cannot occur without official permission. In addition, in the name of self-sufficiency the government has slashed the number of aid recipients by 95%, shutting down feeding programmes, asking humanitarian agencies to leave and thereby depriving two thirds of the population of the food aid on which they survived. It is perplexing that a president who reportedly describes the people of his country as its greatest asset appears bent on depreciating this asset by any necessary means.

On behalf of my fellow panellists I would like to end by urging members of the Commission and other people of influence within the international community to use their good offices to ensure the following:

1. Facilitate as a matter of urgency the demarcation of Eritrea's border with Ethiopia in line with the international ruling, in order to ensure that this issue no longer serves as a justification for continued repression
2. The immediate implementation of Eritrea's ratified constitution and the return of all of the rights enshrined within it, including the Freedoms of Conscience, Religion, Expression, Opinion, Movement, Assembly and Organisation. The Eritrean government should also be encouraged to respect the right to conscientious objection, and to end the practice of indefinitely extending the legally stipulated 18 month term of military service
3. An End to Arbitrary Arrest and Indefinite Detention without Charge. The Eritrean government should be persuaded either to immediately bring detainees to trial before recognised courts of law - which should include the presence of international observers to ensure impartiality - or to set them free
4. The urgent granting of unlimited and unhindered access to all detainees for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the European Union (EU) Delegation in Asmara and/or any other competent international body
5. Access for all detainees to immediate family members, and to medical treatment and legal representation
6. Strongly recommend that Eritrea both signs and ratifies the United Nations Convention against Torture (CAT), which should not cause undue hardship to the government, since Eritrea has already acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter, both of which prohibit this reprehensible practice, in (Article 7) and (Article 5) respectively

Finally, with specific regard to the government of the United Kingdom, we ask as a matter of urgency that HMG would

7. Thoroughly investigate reports of intimidation or harassment of members of the Eritrean Diaspora in the United Kingdom by elements supportive of the Eritrean regime
8. Ensure that asylum seekers from Eritrea receive a more sympathetic hearing than they have so far received, since the government's obsessive attempts to control every aspect of society and to forcibly repress even the mildest dissent means that the overwhelming majority of people who have fled that country have an extremely well founded fear of being persecuted should they return there.