

# briefing

## Eritrea

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## 1. ERITREA: Repression of Religious Freedom, Torture, Arbitrary Detention

Eritrea is presently one of the most repressive countries on the African continent with regard to its overall human rights record, and even ranks significantly amongst offending nations worldwide. It is also rated the second worst abuser of religious liberties on the African continent after Somalia, a failed state.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. A Deteriorating Human Rights Climate

When Eritrea won independence from Ethiopia in 1993 after a lengthy and heroic war, there were high hopes that it would become a beacon of democracy and good governance for the rest of the African continent. However, a costly post-independence war with Ethiopia has depleted the country's resources. This combined with the continuing tension caused by Ethiopia's refusal to agree to an internationally demarcated border appears to have made the Eritrean Government extremely wary of the possible existence of 'an enemy within' and suspicious of even the mildest form of dissent. As a result, a commendable national constitution was ratified but never implemented, and promised democratisation and elections were indefinitely deferred. Furthermore, an irrational fear on the part of the Government of any perceived threat to national unity has meant that nearly all of the extensive rights enshrined within the Constitution, which were accepted, at least in theory, by the Government that drafted it, continue to be utterly disregarded.

For several years large-scale human rights violations have been occurring throughout the country. There has been no press freedom in Eritrea since September 2001, when the Government closed down the independent media, imprisoning over a dozen journalists, the majority of whom remain in incommunicado detention to this day. In November 2005 Dawit Isaac made international headlines when it was announced that he had been released following pressure from the Swedish government. Mr. Isaac is a citizen of both Sweden and Eritrea. Angered by the underlying inference that it might be susceptible to international pressure, the government subsequently stated that Mr. Isaac had merely been temporarily released for medical treatment, and he was returned to prison soon thereafter.

As the Paris-based organisation Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has pointed out, Eritrea's situation "is unique in the world; ...Eritrea has been in an extended news blackout since that night in September 2001".<sup>2</sup> It is now the only African country, and one of the few left in the world, that has no privately owned newspapers, journals or media outlets. Sadly, at least four of these journalists are now reported to have died in detention. Perhaps the most prominent was Fessehaye (Joshua) Yohannes, playwright, renowned liberation fighter and founding editor of the popular weekly paper, Setit. In January 2007 credible sources confirmed that he had been found dead in a military prison. He was tortured on several occasions after his arrest in 2001 and, as a result, one of his arms was paralysed and he had been walking with difficulty for several years. During one bout of torture, his fingernails are said to have been deliberately ripped out.<sup>3</sup>

In November 2006, following the defection of several prominent journalists, the Government launched a wave of arrests of public media workers. Included among those detained without trial were nine state media journalists, all of whom were held in the

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<sup>1</sup> World Watch List, January 2006, **Open Doors International**.

<sup>2</sup> "Africa's biggest prison for the press since September 2001", Africa Press Release, **Reporters Without Borders (RSF)**, 20 September 2004.

<sup>3</sup> "Sources say writer Fessehaye "Joshua" Yohannes has died in detention", Africa Press Release, **RSF**, 8 February 2007.

underground prison at the No. 5 police station, where they were beaten until they gave the passwords to their e-mail accounts. They were progressively released without charge by February 2007, but were placed under close police surveillance.

Freedom of expression and the voicing of dissenting political views were also effectively ended in September 2001, when the Government imprisoned eleven former members of the ruling party who had urged greater democratisation. They too are currently held incommunicado and without charge. After arresting the eleven former members, the Eritrean Government went on to incarcerate other public servants it considered to be sympathetic to these men, including a former consul general, journalists working for the government press, businessmen, the solicitor-general and local government administrators, as well as members of the families of people previously arrested. Students have also faced government pogroms, and several have fled the country. Again, reports indicate that several people detained at this time may also have died.<sup>4</sup>

In March 2004, and in the first such move of its kind, the African Commission on Human Rights handed down a landmark ruling calling for the release of the eleven men and stating that by detaining them without trial for so long, the Government of Eritrea was “in violation of articles of the African Charter of Human and Peoples’ Rights”, namely, those providing for the right to express and disseminate one’s opinions, the right to liberty, and the right to have one’s case heard. However, these are a few high profile cases that have managed to receive a degree of international attention. In reality, there may be upwards of twenty thousand political prisoners currently detained in Eritrea.<sup>5</sup>

### **3. Severe Repression of Religious Freedom**

In addition to political prisoners, there are several thousand prisoners of conscience and belief in Eritrea.<sup>6</sup> This number includes many of the country’s Jehovah’s Witnesses, the first religious group to face persecution due to their refusal to vote in the independence referendum, or to take part in compulsory military service. As punishment Jehovah Witnesses are now effectively denied the rights of citizenship in Eritrea. They cannot access public services, obtain official ID cards or receive commercial licenses. The prisoners of conscience also include several hundred Muslims detained during the course of the 1990s on suspicion of links with the opposition and largely-Muslim Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), of being sympathetic to an Islamist/jihad movement, or of opposing the installation of the government-imposed Sunni Grand Mufti. Many are said to have endured torture, and several are reported to have been executed extra-judicially. As part of its alleged campaign against jihadi theology, the Government also closed certain Islamic educational institutions and charity organisations.

The Eritrean Government has now turned its attention to members of specified Protestant denominations, despite the fact that they willingly accept military service. In May 2002 the Government ordered the closure of every Christian church save those belonging to the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran denominations, and ended all other religious practices except Sunni Islam. This effectively rendered the majority of the country’s Protestant churches illegal, heralding the beginning of severe and increasing persecution, particularly of Pentecostal and Evangelical denominations. Although the Government initially

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<sup>4</sup>“The obscure and tragic end of the G-15”, [www.Awate.com](http://www.Awate.com), 31 August 2006.

<sup>5</sup> During 2007 extremely credible anonymous sources revealed that in total around 40,000 people may currently be detained in Eritrea. Estimates also come from information on detainees and the ‘disappeared’ obtained by [www.Farajat.com](http://www.Farajat.com), [www.Awate.com](http://www.Awate.com), and **Human Rights Watch**.

<sup>6</sup> Estimates from information obtained by **CSW, Release-Eritrea (UK), Compass Direct, www.Farajat.com, Human Rights Concern-Eritrea**.

stated that churches could apply for official registration, the few churches able to meet its stringent criteria have yet to receive official sanction. Registration was further inhibited by reports that the regulations obliged churches to submit documents detailing the names and addresses of their members and subsequently used this information to trace and arrest them.

Suspicious of the denominational links that some of these churches have with sister churches worldwide, the Eritrean Government has demonised all of them, alternating between equating them with Islamists and accusing them of being agents paid by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to destabilise Eritrea. Although Eritrean nationals founded most of the targeted independent churches without foreign assistance, influence or input, they too are accused of being alien and non-indigenous. It is now almost impossible for members of proscribed churches to meet and worship, even in their own homes, as the Government encourages neighbours to spy on each other and report gatherings that may be church-related. Government forces have raided weddings, New Year celebrations, funeral wakes and other social gatherings to arrest those in attendance. In some instances entire households have been arrested whilst holding family devotional times in their homes. None of the detainees have been formally charged with an offence, neither has any of them been brought before a recognised court of law. Some have been released after being forced to sign documents stating that they had given up their beliefs and joined the Orthodox Church, and others have been released after a period of detention only to be rearrested at a later date in what has been termed a policy of “revolving door arrests”.

According to BBC journalist Jonah Fischer, the outbreak of repression can be explained by the fact that the Eritrean government appears ‘to be afraid that people who consider their highest allegiance to be God, at some point may not be patriotic and follow the state's instructions.’ Other Eritrea observers detect a more long-term campaign that has its foundations in the ruling party's Marxist political orientation and a concomitant antipathy towards religion. They point out that in policy documents drawn up during the mid 1970s, members of the present government vowed to vigorously oppose all ‘imperialist-created new counter-revolutionary faiths’, such as Jehovah Witnesses and Pentecostals, and to punish anyone attempting to use religion to sow discord and undermine the progress of the Eritrean people during or after the conclusion of the armed conflict.<sup>7</sup>

According to proponents of this school of thought, the Government is currently enacting policies drafted in the 1970s. Moreover, they maintain that in reality, the campaign of repression was launched in 1994, when the Government shut down several Christian publications including the newspapers of the Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran and Orthodox Churches. More explicit persecution began in the armed services in 1999, when an order was allegedly issued forbidding Christians from specific Protestant denominations to practise their faith.

Subsequently, in 2000 gangs attacked gospel assembly halls within the vicinity of the Orthodox churches of St Mary and of Holy Trinity in Asmara. Benches, musical instruments, doors and windows were smashed during the raids and hundreds of Bibles, songbooks and other Christian literature were burned in the streets. All of this occurred in the presence of government security operatives, yet no one was arrested. Worse still, police who were present at the scene are said to have admitted that the gangs had government permission to destroy all ‘illegitimate’ places of worship.

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<sup>7</sup>“The EPLF and Religious Policy in Eritrea”, 17 December 2004, **Release-Eritrea (UK)**; “Current Situation of Orthodox Churches”, 17 December 2004, **Release-Eritrea (UK)**; “Full Blown Assault on Religion in Eritrea”, Fr. Halleyesus Oqbai, 23 February 2003, [www.Asmarino.com](http://www.Asmarino.com).

Repression is said to be particularly severe in the armed forces. According to reports received by CSW, prayer meetings are now forbidden and attendance is punishable by imprisonment. Moreover, anyone found in possession of a Bible is liable to face severe punishment. CSW has even received unconfirmed reports indicating that young Christians in the military may even have been shot after being discovered reading the Bible. In one of the most widely reported cases, 57 teenagers were jailed in metal shipping containers in August 2003 after being found with Bibles at their summer military camp. They and others have been kept in these containers, which due to the Red Sea climate are baking hot by day and freezing cold by night, in an effort to force them to abandon their faith. Several people have been forced to recant as a result of the harsh treatment they have endured, and all but six of the afore-mentioned students eventually succumbed to these appalling conditions. According to reports, several Jehovah Witnesses are also incarcerated in these containers, including, for a time, an elderly man in his nineties.

In January 2005 reports emerged indicating that the Eritrean Government had created a Task Force charged with eliminating charismatic forms of Christianity by the end of 2005. Persecution increased markedly since then and has continued unabated to the present date. In an indication of this increase, based on figures obtained from church sources in Eritrea, the estimated numbers of detained Christians has steadily risen from around 300 in 2003, to 883 in April 2004, to 1,778 in November 2005, to 1918 in October 2006. Towards the end of 2006 around one in ten Eritrean evangelicals were reported to be jailed,<sup>8</sup> and by June 2007 it was estimated that over 2000 Christians were in detention in Eritrea (see appendix for a [Catalogue of Religious Repression since 2003](#)).

#### **4. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment**

Incarceration in metal shipping containers – either in isolation or in numbers so large as to necessitate sleeping in shifts – is just one of several means of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment employed by the Eritrean regime. Methods of mistreatment include extreme physical exercise, being forced to stand for hours in the midday sun, life-threatening beatings administered with electric prods, sticks, whips or pipes, and actual torture techniques.

Torture appears to be used systematically in Eritrean detention centres. In a 2004 report, Amnesty International detailed several means of torture employed by the Eritrean security services. Prisoners describe being 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 with arms behind the back and wrists bound to 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.<sup>9</sup> There are increasing reports of prisoners whose limbs need to be amputated after they were tied in such positions for extended periods of time. In a particularly tragic case, a young man named Habtom is reported to have had both arms amputated after having been tied in a torture position.<sup>10</sup>

It has been reported that members of ‘forbidden churches’ and other prisoners have been deliberately exposed to malaria-carrying mosquitoes. It has also been reported that

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<sup>8</sup> “One in Ten Eritrean Evangelicals are now in Prison” **Release-Eritrea (UK)** Press Release, 26 August 2006.

<sup>9</sup>“Eritrea: ‘You have no right to ask’ – Government resists scrutiny on human rights”, **Amnesty International**, May 2004, **Human Rights Concern-Eritrea**.

<sup>10</sup> Testimony of Dr. Yosief in “Piercing the Veil of Immunity: An eyewitness account”, Daniel R. Mekonnen, Bloemfontein, South Africa, [www.Asmarino.com](http://www.Asmarino.com), 15 March 2007.

imprisoned Christians held in Assab Military Prison have been placed in 44-gallon drums and rolled in front of other prisoners. On some occasions they are obliged to repeatedly walk barefoot over sharp rocks for an hour. Some victims are reported to have been partially paralysed as a result of physical assaults and torture. Several female prisoners have also suffered rape and other sexual abuse. Others have experienced problems in their wombs after being forced to lie prostrate on baking hot ground for several hours. In a further indication of the prevalence of such practices, during 2006 the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, a renowned United Kingdom-based centre of excellence, assisted 150 Eritreans, many of them Pentecostal Christians, who for the most part had been subjected to rape, to beatings and to being bound in contorted positions.<sup>11</sup>

Prisoners deemed worthy of severe punishment can also be placed in 1.5m x 1.5m underground cells permanently lit by one electric bulb, or in 2m x 2m unlit cells known as "shella". As with shipping containers, such severe punishment cells lack sanitary provisions and adequate ventilation. All prisoners are deprived of adequate food and timely access to medical treatment, and they are often subjected to forced labour. According to firsthand testimonies, prisoners are fortunate if they are given stone-hard bread and tea twice-a-day, they are only officially allowed to go to the lavatory once-a-day, and they can only bathe infrequently and usually in pools of stagnant water. As additional punishment female detainees are deprived of sanitary provisions during their menstrual cycles, while at the same time, being forced to undertake military discipline during the midday heat.<sup>12</sup>

There is evidence that a growing number of detainees are currently dying from malnutrition. There is also growing evidence of extrajudicial killings in Eritrea's detention centres and deaths as a result of or subsequent to torture. In October 2006 it was reported that two young Christians, Immanuel Andegergesh and Kibrom Firemichel, had died from torture and severe dehydration in a military camp outside the town of Adi-Quala two days after being arrested for holding a religious service in a private home south of Asmara. Later, in mid-February 2007 came reports that another young Christian, Magos Solomon Semere, had died at the Adi-Nefase Military Confinement Facility just outside Assab following torture and persistent pneumonia, for which he had been denied appropriate medical treatment.

## 5. Government Denials

From a promising young democracy, Eritrea has deteriorated in a matter of years into a country where widespread violations of human rights occur routinely in a climate of impunity. However, despite a growing body of evidence to the contrary, the Eritrean Government continues to issue blanket denials of the existence of persecution in the country, stating that "no groups or persons are persecuted in Eritrea for their beliefs or religion" and that people were "free to worship according to their wish." It has also reacted with increasing belligerence to all criticisms or supplications made on behalf of those suffering as a result of its policies. When, in September 2004, and for the first time ever, the US State Department designated Eritrea a Country of Particular Concern due to its "particularly severe violations of religious freedom", the Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded by saying that it was "only astonishing to see the US, which lacks moral and legal high grounds on human rights and the respect for religions, make an attempt to become the self-appointed adjudicator."

On 7 October 2004 the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church (EOC), the Mufti of Eritrea, the Bishop of the Eritrea Catholic Church and the President of the Evangelical

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<sup>11</sup> **Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture**, Annual Report 2006.

<sup>12</sup> "The State of Human Rights in Eritrea, 2006", **Suwera Centre for Human Rights**, April 2007, also witness testimonies documented by **CSW** ("Visit to Eritrean Refugees September 2005"; "Prisoner Statements for Conservative Party Human Rights Commission", July 2006), and by **Release-Eritrea (UK)**.

Lutheran Church also issued a statement criticising the International Religious Freedom report. In the document the leaders stated that “alien and externally driven sects” were violating religious freedom in Eritrea. In an indication of the political exigencies behind the document, the leaders concluded by stating that Eritrea ought to be a country “of particular concern” for the lack of basic human rights to food and shelter of those unjustly deported and those displaced from their homes who are still languishing in tent and cardboard camps. At the time many observers felt that given the extent of the repression in Eritrea, the four leaders had little alternative but to issue the letter, and by the end of 2004 it became apparent that even members of permitted churches were not immune to persecution. In a highly irregular series of punitive measures that began in January 2005 and were occasioned by government machinations, Patriarch Antonios of the EOC was unlawfully deprived of his administrative powers, removed from office on false charges, placed under stringent house arrest and finally, forcibly evicted from his official residence and replaced with a rebel bishop on Pentecost Sunday, June 2007. Patriarch Antonios suffers from diabetes, and his current state of health and whereabouts were unknown at the time of writing (for a fuller account, please see [appendix](#)).

## **6. Arbitrary Detention**

Life in today’s Eritrea is increasingly characterised by random disappearances, as people are arbitrarily detained without any notification to family and friends. The country has effectively become a maze of detention centres. As conventional prisons overflow with political prisoners, prisoners of conscience and belief and alleged conscription evaders, airport hangars, police cells 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 (often in the open air), and sources also report the emergence of “ghost houses” in Asmara, a phenomenon popularised by the northern Sudanese regime whereby seemingly normal homes or villas in otherwise normal neighbourhoods function as torture or detention centres.

Eritrean society is now heavily militarised, with army-affiliated companies even dominating the national economy. Military service is obligatory and is meant to last for eighteen months but is in fact open-ended and can be recurrent. Even minors are subject to conscription, as is evident from the testimony of a sixteen year old who managed to flee to Israel. Due to his propensity for lateness he was not at school on the day when his entire class was rounded up at gunpoint and several pupils were taken to a military camp in an unknown location<sup>13</sup>. In addition, conscripts are often used as unpaid labour in government agricultural schemes and in private farms belonging to senior military officers.

The Government regularly conducts arbitrary mass roundups of people within the age of enlistment in order to find “draft dodgers”. In particular, a round-up that occurred towards the close of 2004 ended in tragedy and drew particular attention to events in Eritrea. On 4 November the Government indiscriminately rounded up thousands of people under the age of 50 and incarcerated them for several hours in the infamous Adi Abeito army camp/prison, situated just outside Asmara. Not for the first time, even Eritreans working for the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) were included in the round up. Some eventually became restive due to overcrowding, poor sanitation and lack of food and warmth. A prison wall either fell or was pushed over by some of the prisoners. As the wall fell it fatally injured six guards. The rest of the guards began firing indiscriminately at the crowd, killing around 50 people, and injuring scores more. According to one report the authorities hastily buried some of the dead while the injured were hospitalised pending re-

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<sup>13</sup> “From Eritrea to Be’er Sheva”, Nurit Wuhrgaft, [www.Haaretz.com](http://www.Haaretz.com), 19 June 2007.



arrest. The Government attempted to dismiss reports on the incident as “overblown”, and insisted on describing the victims of the round up as “gangsters” and draft dodgers. However, the country was reported to be extremely tense following this incident.

In another indication of the extreme measures adopted by the Government to enforce conscription, in October 2005 the Italian daily newspaper La Corriere della Sera carried a series of pictures allegedly taken by an Italian diplomat documenting the execution in broad daylight of a suspected draft dodger on the streets of Asmara.<sup>14</sup>

The Eritrean Government moves swiftly to ‘disappear’ anyone that it feels constitutes or may constitute a threat of any kind, even as they arrive at the country’s international airport. Aster Yohannes is a case in point. Aster Yohannes is the wife of Petros Solomon, Eritrea’s former Minister of Maritime Resources. He was also previously the Minister of Foreign Affairs, an Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) military commander and intelligence chief, and he had been a member of the EPLF political bureau since 1977. Mr Solomon was detained in September 2001 at Asmara airport as he returned from studying in the US. The shock of Mr. Solomon’s imprisonment severely traumatised their four young children who have since been separated, the boys to be cared for by their paternal grandmother, the girls to be cared for by Aster’s mother. Aster, was also studying in the US, tried unsuccessfully to reunite her family in the United States. However, President Isaias Afewerki refused to allow the children to leave Eritrea. Aster then sought and received assurances from the Eritrean Ambassador to the US that she would be allowed to return to Eritrea unmolested to care for her children. Instead, she was arrested at Asmara airport on 18 December 2003 and was not heard of until relatively recently, when reports emerged that she had been removed from an extended period of solitary confinement, but was being kept away from the main prison population.

## 7. Refugee Crisis

Eritrea is amongst the most tightly controlled societies in the world. Meetings of over seven people, even on a public pavement, require official authorisation. This edict, which was recently reiterated by the Government, is not, as some have incorrectly surmised, an attempt to accommodate smaller meetings of proscribed denominations. It is in reality a further indication of the obsessive desire of a suspicious and repressive regime to be in total control of every aspect of public and private life, thereby cementing its grip on power.

In the face of overwhelming repression thousands of Eritreans, Christian and non-Christian, are fleeing the country that they fought so valiantly to liberate. According to Home Office figures in the 3rd quarter of 2006, the largest number of applications for asylum in the UK came from Eritreans.<sup>15</sup> In a further indication of the abysmal human rights climate in Eritrea, according to the US Committee on Refugees and Immigrants World Refugee Survey, during 2006, 5000 Eritreans fled to Ethiopia on foot. Another 6000 were so desperate to leave that they risked crossing the Sahara Desert, again on foot, to Sudan,<sup>16</sup> and some went on to Libya and beyond. Opposition sources put the number of Eritrean refugees arriving in Sudan at 400 to 600 per month.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> “Reportage Speciale: in fuga dall’Eritrea Massacri e repressioni. Perché la popolazione scappa dal Corno d’Africa” di Massimo A. Alberizzi e Michele Focarete, “Fotografie di morte”, 25 October 2005.

<sup>15</sup> “Asylum Statistics: 3rd Quarter 2006, United Kingdom”, **UK Home Office**, [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs06/asylumq306.pdf](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs06/asylumq306.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> **US Committee on Refugees and Immigrants**, World Refugee Survey 2006.

<sup>17</sup> “Eritreans risk death in the Sahara”, Martin Plaut, Africa Regional Editor, **BBC NEWS**: [news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-1/hi/world/africa/6492961.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-1/hi/world/africa/6492961.stm); 25 March 2007.

An unknown number of Eritreans have perished in the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea in a bid to find sanctuary from repression. Those who survive are often exploited financially en route by agents purporting to arrange their escape, and women, girls and even young men and boys are vulnerable to severe abuse. Unfortunately, Eritreans who manage to reach neighbouring African countries rarely find true refuge. For example, in Kenya, they are not permitted to work, yet police and immigration officials often demand large bribes from Eritrean refugees – who are ethnically distinct from the local population – while threatening them with imprisonment and possible deportation in the event of non-payment. They can also face severe harassment from the Eritrean embassy and its local operatives, and experience difficulties in obtaining timely and accurate documentation from the local offices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In South Africa, the Eritrean embassy has in the past arbitrarily cancelled the passports of those known to oppose the Government and have then requested that the South African immigration authorities arrange their deportations. At least two people are known to have suffered this misfortune. In Ethiopia, several thousand refugees are currently eking out miserable existences in camps sandwiched between the opposing armies of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Upon arrival in Sudan, Eritrean refugees are routinely handed over to the authorities, who assault and detain them, and friends and relatives are obliged to pay for their freedom. In addition, Eritrean agents operate freely in Sudan, harassing refugees and, in several instances, “disappearing” them from UNHCR camps. Those who seek to escape the tribulations of Sudan by fleeing to Libya in the hope of better treatment instead face even greater mistreatment at the hands of the Libyan authorities and local population, including physical attacks, sexual assaults and detention. In May 2007 some 450 Eritreans were reported to be held in appalling conditions in Misrata detention camp in Libya. The group is said to include around 80 women and ten children.

After reaching Libya many Eritreans subsequently risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean in dangerously overcrowded and unsteady vessels in an attempt to reach the relative safety of Europe. Once there, they in many instances continue to experience difficulties, particularly in regard to obtaining leave to remain. Harassment can also continue. For example in the United Kingdom, many Eritrean community groups are dominated by government sympathisers who fled Ethiopian rule but stayed on after Eritrean independence. Government supporters are militant in defending their country and president with quasi-religious zeal and often with threats of violence and actual physical violence. Consequently, anyone who speaks openly about the current realities in Eritrea cannot expect to find assistance from these groups, but is likely instead to face severe harassment. There are also growing concerns regarding the impartiality of pro-government interpreters during asylum interviews, and fears that information divulged on such occasions may eventually fall into the hands of the Eritrean government, to the detriment of the family of an asylum seeker.

Angered by the flight of so many of its younger citizens, the Eritrean Government has adopted a shoot-to-kill policy for anyone caught in the process of escape. During 2006 there were unconfirmed reports of bodies with gunshot wounds along the Sudan-Eritrea border.<sup>18</sup> As a further deterrent, the Government began arresting the parents or oldest surviving relatives of known escapees, forcing their families to pay 50,000 Nakfas (around £2000) in order to secure their release. It also withdrew commercial licences from businesses owned by such families. To further dissuade escapes, during 2006 the Government is reported to have executed several men for allegedly assisting others to escape to Sudan. None were brought to trial prior to execution, and in some cases the death sentences were carried out in public.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “The State of Human Rights in Eritrea, 2006”, **Suwera Centre for Human Rights**, April 2007.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, April 2007

Not surprisingly, refugees of all or no faiths who are rejected by host nations are subjected to appalling cruelty if they suffer the misfortune of being returned to Eritrea. Returnees who were fortunate enough to escape the country once again have reported receiving harsh punishments, including forced labour, severe beatings, extra-judicial killings and confinement in underground sweltering conditions.<sup>20</sup> For example, in 2002, over 220 Eritreans were forcibly deported from Malta and, upon arrival in Eritrea, were detained in Adi Abeito prison, tortured and subsequently moved to the maximum-security prison on the Red Sea island of Nakhura. The Libyan authorities also forcibly returned over 110 people on 21 July 2004 to certain detention and torture. So far in 2007, they have twice threatened to do so again. In addition, on 30 May 2007 twelve Eritrean asylum seekers who were allegedly caught attempting to cross the Sinai peninsular into Israel were spotted at Cairo Airport in the company of security officers, possibly in the process of being returned to Eritrea and certain trauma.

## 8. Human Rights Obligations

Article 19 of the Eritrean Constitution allows for freedom of conscience, religion, movement, assembly, organisation and expression of opinion. Moreover, in Article 17, the Constitution stipulates the right to a fair and public trial, the presumption of innocence and the right of appeal. It also states that anyone arrested should be brought before a court of law within 48 hours of their arrest, while the Eritrean Penal Code states that once arrested, a person should be charged within 28 days or released.

Eritrea has also acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, all of which contain provisions for, amongst other things, the right to freedom of religion.

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<sup>20</sup> Some of these testimonies were documented by **CSW**. Others are found in "Eritrea: Voices of Torture", **Human Rights Concern-Eritrea**, 2006, in a series of witness statements documented by Eritrean Human Rights Activist Elsa Chyrum of **Human Rights Concern-Eritrea**, and in reports received by **Release-Eritrea (UK)**.

## 9. Recommendations

1. There is an urgent need for high-level advocacy on behalf of Eritrea's many detainees to persuade the Government to honour its obligations under international law and ensure:
  - **The Return of Religious Freedom:** as outlined in Article 18 of the ICCPR. Article 18 also forbids any coercion on the part of the state that would impair this freedom. Eritrea's permanent war footing cannot be used as an excuse to abrogate this right since Article 4 of the Covenant states that even during public emergencies governments should not undertake actions that discriminate on religious grounds.
  - **The Implementation of Eritrea's Ratified Constitution:** this would ensure the return of all of the rights enshrined within it, including the Freedoms of 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.
  - **An End to Arbitrary Arrest and Indefinite Detention Without Charge:** Eritrea has acceded to the ICCPR and the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights which, in Articles 9 and 6 respectively, outline the Right to Liberty and Security of Person. Article 9 of the ICCPR also outlines the right to be brought before a recognised, impartial court without undue delay, as does Article 7 of the African Charter. The Eritrean Government should be persuaded to either bring detainees to trial before recognised courts of law - which should include the presence of international observers to ensure impartiality - or set them free. In several instances children have been placed under arrest (**see appendix**). This contravenes Eritrea's undertakings under the Convention of the Rights of the Child. The Government should also be encouraged to allow 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. Prisoners should also be allowed access to immediate family members, to medical treatment, and to legal representation.
  - **An End to the Use of Torture:** Eritrea has already acceded to international treaties that prohibit this unsavoury practice, namely, the ICCPR (Article 7) and the African Charter (Article 5).
2. **Aid and Human Rights:** Some international aid ought to be linked to discernable improvements in the country's overall human rights culture, or to an agreement either for the provision of human rights training for members of the state security apparatus, or for assistance in the development of independent local human rights organisations and defenders.
3. **Urgent Resolution of the Border Issue:** In order to remove a source of instability that has contributed towards insecurity in the entire Horn of Africa and the deterioration of human rights in both Ethiopia and Eritrea, there is a need for key members of the international community to undertake sustained high-level advocacy to ensure Ethiopia's unconditional compliance with the international ruling on the border between the two countries, and the demarcation of this border as a matter of urgency.

## **10. APPENDIX - CATALOGUE OF RELIGIOUS REPRESSION SINCE 2003**

*Please note that this catalogue does not constitute a comprehensive account of the instances of religious persecution that have occurred in Eritrea since 2003, but outlines those events that have come to CSW's attention since 2003. It serves to illustrate the large-scale and sustained nature of religious repression in Eritrea.*

### **10.1. 2003**

During January 2003, 50 members of the charismatic Rhema Church were jailed for ten days following a police raid on a New Year celebration in Asmara.

The period from mid-February to March was marked by severe repression. The news agency Compass Direct reported that a total of 170 Christians were jailed, beaten and threatened with death by security operatives following five separate police raids on worship services, wedding ceremonies and other gatherings. The police jailed men, women and children for 'practising a new religion'. Most were held for over two weeks without being formally charged. One group was held for fifteen days in metal shipping containers designed to serve as severe punishment cells, while another group of people witnessed their pastor being humiliated, tortured and forced to walk along sharp rocks for half an hour. Moreover, people who bailed jailed relatives were forced to sign a document stating that the bailed prisoner would be liable for execution if he or she were to be caught at any subsequent church meeting.

On 17 April, fifteen Christians attending a Bible study in Kushte required hospitalisation after being attacked and badly beaten by a stick-wielding mob that allegedly included four Orthodox priests. The following day members of the Mesert Christos Church in Asmara were held in detention for an entire day and, upon being released, were warned never to meet again.

Over 56 Protestants from towns in the northern province of Sahel were forcibly conscripted following police raids, which occurred during working hours on 29 April. Most were healthcare and other professionals and the majority had already served their terms of military service. Subsequently, 36 members of Kale Hiwot Church were taken from their homes and work places to a military training camp. As they were led away the police taunted their friends and relatives saying that church elders were next in line for detention.

26 April was the eve of Easter Sunday. In accordance with a long held tradition the youngsters from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Asmara had taken to the streets, singing hymns about the resurrection. As they passed a local bar at 11.30 pm they were confronted by an angry security service officer who informed them that such activities were forbidden to members of 'closed churches'. Upon being informed of their denomination, the officer began to accuse the group of 'misusing' the freedoms granted to their church. Two young men stood their ground and were subsequently arrested. They were released on the afternoon of 29 April and were severely warned against repeating this Easter tradition. The detention of the two young men caused great alarm, since it served as the first indication that even members of a 'permitted' denomination are not immune from persecution.

On 7 May police raided prayer meetings held in the private homes of the members of the Rhema Church in Asmara, arresting 54 members and two evangelists and charging them with holding illegal meetings.

On 24 August Compass Direct reported that local police in the Red Sea port city of Massawa arrested ten Protestants from several independent denominations after they had gathered in a private home for Sunday worship. During the same month, 57 teenagers were jailed in metal shipping containers after being found with Bibles at their summer military camp at Sawa. They and others have been kept in these containers in an effort to force them to abandon their faith. All but six eventually succumbed to the pressure.

On 7 September police in Asmara arrested twelve Christians who were meeting in a home for worship. Nearly all those arrested were young people and members of the Dubre Bethel Church. The police chief demanded that they pledge in writing to deny their faith in order to be released. When the six women and six men refused, the chief ordered that their food rations be withheld.

In October Compass Direct reported that government authorities confiscated and sealed the complex of the Full Gospel Church in Asmara, ordering the church staff and members to evacuate the building permanently on 15 October.

Compass Direct also reported that in mid-November the principal of Bakra Secondary School accused twelve evangelical students of conducting 'illegal' Christian activities on school premises. The children were detained for two weeks at Police Station No 1 and upon their release their parents were ordered to 'control' their children in order to prevent a repetition of such activities.

On 23 November police in Mendefera arrested eight members of Kale Hiwot Church, including Pastor Iyob. All were deprived of food for several days and pressurised to renounce their manner of worship.

On 14 December thirteen Christians were arrested in the town of Adi Kihe, situated 70 miles from Asmara. Compass Direct reports that elsewhere on the same day a pastor and ten members of the Faith of Christ Church were arrested along with an assistant evangelist from the officially sanctioned Evangelical Lutheran Church while attending an Evangelical Lutheran service. The evangelist was released two days later, following intervention by church officials. The others remain in detention.

By the end of 2003 the Government had detained over 300 Protestant Christians. Persecution continued into 2004.

## **10.2. 2004**

On 15 February police in Asmara arrested Pastor Mengis Tewoldemedhin of the Hallelujah Church and his congregation, including children, as they worshiped in secret in a house in the Edaga Hamuse district. The 34 men and seventeen women were held at Adi Abeito military prison until 18 February, when Pastor Tewoldemedhin was separated from the group and locked in an underground cell from which he later escaped, fleeing across the border to Sudan. According to an unconfirmed report from a local source, members of the congregation under eighteen were sent to Sawa for forcible military training; those over eighteen were forcibly conscripted into the army and Mrs. Tsega, the owner of the house where the meeting occurred, was held in Police Station No.2. According to a Compass Direct report of 23 March 2004, 46 members of the church remain in incommunicado detention.

On 23 February ten members of the Full Gospel Church were arrested in a house in the Aba Shwale district of Asmara. All were imprisoned except the elderly house owner, who

was ordered to pay a fine that amounted to over half a month's salary for hosting illegal meeting in her home. This incident marked the first time that criminal charges and fines had been given to members of proscribed denominations.

In March the Eritrean authorities began to arrest entire families whilst they worshipped together in their own homes. On 17 March a lay member of the Rhema Church was arrested at his home in Asmara along with his wife, six children and father-in-law as they were holding family devotions. The family was held overnight at a local police station, and then transferred to Adi Abeito camp/prison, which is situated outside Asmara. A few were released after agreeing to pay fines.

On the evening of 18 March another Rhema Church leader was arrested along with his wife and five children. They were held overnight in Police Station No. 5 and transferred to Adi Abeito prison on the following day.

On 18 March police in Assab arrested twenty members of the Kale Hiwot Church as they attended a home group meeting. In another indication that sanctioned churches also face repression, Compass Direct reported that on the following day the security services began to monitor the Sunday school meetings of a group of young adults from the Orthodox Church and their priest whom they accused of conducting 'illegal activities.' On 19 March police arrested Yona Haile, an Eritrean Christian singer, accusing him of activities contrary to government policy. However, in late June he managed to escape from the Sawa Military Centre along with Pastor Tewoldemedhin. Both are currently seeking refuge in Sudan.

On 20 March police in Asmara investigating the activities of a group of young adults from the Medhane Alem Orthodox Church (possibly the same group monitored on 19 March), sealed their Sunday afternoon meeting place. The lay leader of the group was arrested and released a day later.

By the end of March 2004 at least 385 Christians were imprisoned in Eritrea. The majority of those detained were young Christians and middle ranked leaders.

On 22 April 2004 Mr. Teklemariam Merkehazion a 62-year-old official in the Orthodox Church was summoned for questioning by government security and subsequently disappeared, ostensibly into Karchele security prison. An experienced journalist, it is reported that Mr. Merkehazion had worked as chief editor of the church's two official publications since 1994 and had strongly advocated that the church maintain its autonomy and steer clear of government influence. Mr. Merkehazion was challenged by the government official responsible for Religion and Faith Affairs and eventually forced out of his editorial post in 2002. However, just as his case began to receive greater international coverage, Mr. Merkhazion was released on 10 November 2004, after spending seven months in jail.

In a clear escalation of events, three senior church leaders were arrested during May 2004. The Rev. Haile Naizge, chairman of the Full Gospel Church, Dr. Kufu Gebremeskel, chairman of the Eritrean Evangelical Alliance and Pastor Tesfatsion Hagos of the Rhema Evangelical Church in Asmara were initially held in police cells in the Eritrean capital. It was reported in August that the three leaders had been transferred from these cells to an unknown location. The three pastors are now thought to be held incommunicado in Wengel Mermera investigation centre, the dungeon-like inner prison in Asmara where many of Eritrea's prominent political prisoners are also believed to be incarcerated. The Rev. Naizge's mother, who was seriously ill at the time of his detention, died without being allowed to see her son. The father of Pastor. Hagos also died. According to an unconfirmed report from 2005 all three were sentenced extra-judicially to five years in prison.

Also incarcerated in May was singer Helen Berhane, 29, who had just released an album of music popular among young Eritreans. A member of the Rhema Church, she is reported to have been held in a shipping container at the Mai-Serwa military camp since 13 May. She is also said to have refused to sign a paper recanting her faith and promising not to participate in Protestant activities. The news agency Compass Direct later reported that a military commander had said to Ms. Berhane: "You will be allowed no visitors, and you will rot here until you sign this paper." The news agency also said that one of Ms. Berhane's guards had reported her to the camp commander after he caught her listening to a Christian programme on a small radio in her container. As punishment she was transferred to an underground cell, where she was kept chained for two weeks.

Another local Christian singer, Hamelmale Habtemichel of the Kale Hiwot Church, is reported to have been taken into custody in Mendefera during the third week of June for releasing a new musical recording. She was taken into custody along with music shop owner Tsegay Abraha, who had recorded and displayed the singer's tape in her shop. Both are said to have spent a month in custody before being released.

On 5 July 34-year-old Meaza Araya and 30-year-old Elsa Ghirmay were arrested in Asmara and taken to Mai Serwa army camp. Both women are from the Full Gospel Church in Asmara. It was Maeza's second arrest. On the same day two members of Rhema Church, Dawit Mesgenna and Tesfa Araya, were arrested and taken to Track B army camp in Asmara.

On 25 July police in the town of Senafe disrupted a marriage ceremony, arresting 30 people, including the 80-year-old father of the bride, Woldegabriel Gebremichel, and his entire family. Those arrested were from the Kale Hiwot and Full Gospel churches, and a variety of renewal movements within the Orthodox churches. Twenty-eight were released after signing a document to the effect that they would not participate in any future evangelical weddings.

There are reports that a renewed crackdown erupted during September 2004. On Friday 3 September, 25 teachers from Islamic Schools around Asmara were reported to have been detained in Wengel Mermera. Then on 6, 7 and 9 September a series of raids were reported to have resulted in the arrests of several hundred members of a variety of evangelical and Pentecostal churches. All of those arrested, including women and children, were said to have been incarcerated in Wengel Mermera. A prison source is reported to have put their number at over 700. However, CSW has yet to confirm this information.

Compass Direct reports that on the evening of 7 September five members of the newly founded New Covenant Church were arrested while meeting for prayer in an office building in Asmara. They were detained for a day at Police Station No. 2. The sole woman amongst them was released, but the four males were transferred to Adi Abeito military camp outside Asmara.

In December 2004 CSW received reports indicating that three Orthodox priests may have been detained during the third week of November 2004. Dr Futsum Gebrenegus, Eritrea's only psychiatrist, Dr Tekleab Menghisteab, a highly respected physician, and the Rev. Gebremedhin Gebregiorgis, an expert theologian, are all reported to have been involved in the renewal movement within the Orthodox Church. In fact, all three detained Orthodox priests were based the Medhane Alem Church. The Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church was reported to have objected to these arrests and accused the government of 'interfering' in church affairs. Following this intervention, for the first time ever the traditional annual Christmas message by the Patriarch was not aired on national media. In



February 2005 it was rumoured that Dr Menghisteab was suffering from hypertension. Later reports emerged that the Rev. Dr Menghisteab had collapsed on at least one occasion and been taken to hospital after being unable to obtain his medication. However, even during this critical time his family were not allowed to visit him and news of his ill health and hospitalisation only reached his family through prison and hospital personnel. All three men are now thought to be detained in Sembel civilian prison, where they too are rumoured to have been sentenced in absentia to five-year terms following a secretive judicial procedure.

### **10.3. 2005**

In January 2005 reports began to circulate concerning the creation of a government Task Force charged with ridding Eritrea of charismatic expressions of Christianity by the end of the year. Persecution has since increased markedly.

Sixty members of the Rhema Charismatic Church were arrested at a New Year's Eve celebration at the house of Pastor Habteab Oqbamichel and his wife Letensae. The group was initially taken to Police Station No. 5 in Asmara and on the following day 36 women in the group were transferred to solitary confinement in Mai-Serwa military camp, where they were later joined by 24 men. Letensae Oqbamichel was reportedly released on 4 January. Two weeks later, Compass Direct reported that 25 others had been released after signing pledges not to take part in such meetings again. Pastor Oqbamichel was not amongst this group and is currently serving a third term of imprisonment; in March 2003 he was jailed along with his wife and five children, and in May 2003 he and several other members of the Rhema Church were arrested and beaten for holding prayer meetings in their homes.

On 9 January came reports that 25 Christians with Catholic backgrounds had been arrested in Asmara during a wedding rehearsal. The group, which included the bride and groom, were all reported to be held in police station No. 1. Most were released after a short period, but three are reported to be detained at Wi'a army camp. On the same day Compass Direct reported a similar swoop, this time on a wedding ceremony in Barentu, western Eritrea. Sixty-seven evangelical men, women and children were detained, including the bride and groom. Amongst those arrested were Pastors Oqbamichel Tekle Himanot and Simon from the Kale Hiwot Church, Pastor Hagos Tuomai of the Full Gospel Church and several children and elderly people. The group was allegedly taken to Sawa military camp for 'military punishment'. Forty-eight youths were conscripted into the army. Most of the others were gradually released during the following months once their families agreed to post bail bonds. However, the pastor and five others were reported to have refused to sign papers renouncing their faith, and Pastor Himanot was placed in solitary confinement.

Again on 9 January, five members of the Kale Hiwot Church who had gathered for a private time of prayer were arrested and taken to Mai Serwa army camp.

Also in January came news that Dr. Segid Birhane, a member of the Kale Hiwot Church who was undertaking National Service in Keren, had been arrested whilst visiting the home of a Christian woman. According to Compass Direct he is being held in Mai-Serwa military camp. The lady he had visited was initially detained, but is reported to have been released two days later after signing a pledge to take no further part in 'unofficial' religious activities.

On 21 January police arrested three more leaders of the Full Gospel Church. Pastors Kidane Gebremeskel, Abraham Belay and Fanuel Mehreteab were reported to be held in Karchele security prison. It has since been reported that despite the fact that ministers of the Gospel are exempt from military service, Pastor Belay has been transferred to Wi'a to undertake military service.

On 29 January, fifteen Christian women were arrested in Keren after gathering together to pray. No charges have been filed against the women, but relatives were informed that the women had been 'engaged in activities that the government did not approve'. On the following day 45 members of the Full Gospel Church in Asmara were detained while meeting in a home for prayer. Sixteen were conscripted into the army, while the rest were released a few weeks later.

On 3 February the Eritrean authorities arrested Professor Senere Zaid, a highly respected specialist in Erosion and Soil and Water Conservation who lectures at the Agriculture Faculty of Asmara University. Local police officials had mounted a two-week search for him after finding his name on the rental contract of a building used for worship by the Kidane Mehrete revival group, an Orthodox renewal movement that was excommunicated following government pressure. The professor was formerly a member of this group but is currently a member of the Church of the Living God, which is a spin-off from Kidane Mehrete. He was released on bail on or around 28 February but was not permitted to discuss his time in detention. He was also obliged to report regularly to the police and to stop attending certain religious gatherings.

On 4 February Compass Direct reported that Pastor Issa Mekonnen and thirteen members of the Kale Hiwot Church in Adi-Teklezan had been arrested while taking part in a Bible study at the pastor's home. They are reportedly being held at Mai Serwa army camp.

Without explanation, in early February, the Medhane Alem Orthodox Church in Asmara was ordered to close down its youth prayer services. At the same time government forces began to patrol outside the church on a daily basis. Then on Saturday 19 February, around 131 children aged between two and eighteen were arrested along with their teachers as they attended Bible Study classes. When the children began to sing songs at the police station, they were beaten and kicked. Three and a half hours later, 101 children aged between two and fourteen were released and told to report back to the police station with their parents on the following Monday. Thirty children aged between fourteen and eighteen were gradually released during March. Their teachers, who also worked as instructors at Asmara University, remain imprisoned, reportedly at Mai Serwa.

On 15 February, police held fifteen female members of a Bible study group from the Medhane Alem church in Keren for one month.

On 16 February, police detained seventeen members of Rhema Church who were meeting at a home in Adi Quala. Ten of them were released two weeks later, while the remainder are reportedly held at Gelalo army camp.

On 9 March, ten members of the Kale Hiwot Church were detained while worshipping in a home in Assab.

Compass Direct reports that on the evening of 13 March, security police in the town of Adi-Kibe arrested sixteen members of the Kale Hiwot Church who were watching a Christian video together. They were held at the local police station and on the following day two older women in the group were released after paying fines. The other 14 people remain in jail, although no charges have been filed against them.

On Friday 18 March, police snatched the Senior Pastor of Muluwengel Full Gospel Church, the Rev. Kidane Weldou, from the streets of Asmara. Neither his family nor his church was informed of his whereabouts or of the charges against him. Compass Direct reported that on the same day, Demoze Afwerki, vice manager of the Housing and Commerce Bank of Eritrea and an active member of the Lutheran Church, was detained at Wengel Mermerna.

Both he and the Rev. Weldou are members of the Executive Committee of Gideons International in Eritrea. At the time of his arrest three of Mr. Afwerki's children were in Asmara, while his wife was in the US. In 2005 Mr. Afwerki was reported to have been released.

On 22 March members of the National Security Office closed down the Semhare Graphics Printing Press, a private Asmara-based company that publishes Christian Literature. They threatened the company's owner, Mr. Tekete, for printing literature for various churches. Mr. Tekete managed to escape detention by posting his own bail money. His company was later allowed to resume printing on the proviso that they obtain official sanction before publishing any Christian literature.

In April Compass Direct reported that evangelical sources in Eritrea had issued a list containing the names of 883 people detained in Eritrea. Sixteen of them are pastors.

In early May CSW received reports indicating that the 61 of the 67 people arrested on 9 January at a wedding ceremony in Barentu had been released. Most were gradually released in the following months when their families paid bail bonds. However, the Senior Pastor and two women were amongst those still detained. Pastor Oqbamichel Tekle Himanot, one of five people reported to have refused to sign papers renouncing their faith, was subsequently subjected to solitary confinement and extremely harsh physical and emotional mistreatment which, according to reports in June, caused him to suffer a nervous breakdown.

On 28 May police raided a wedding party in Asmara, arresting the bride, the groom and over 250 guests. Amongst those detained were gospel singer Essey Stephanos, Pastor Gideon from the Meseret Kristos Church and an Evangelist named Ammanuel from the Kale Hiwot Church. The bride and groom were released a month later, along with half of the guests. The rest were initially detained at Asmara's 5th Police Station, and subsequently transferred to Adi Abeito military prison. They were then taken to the army detention centre in Wi'a, and following an international day of prayer and fasting for Christian prisoners, they were moved to Sawa Military camp, from where they were eventually released.

On 6 July Professor Semere Zaid of Asmara University was re-arrested while reporting at a police station as required. The professor was initially detained at Karchele prison, but is now said to be held in Sembel civilian prison. It is also reported that he has been sentenced in secret and in absentia to a two-year prison term.

According to reports, in late July the Orthodox Patriarch's close advisor Yitbarek Berhe, a renown theologian and teacher who is an Orthodox deacon and the Deputy Administrator of the Church Synod, was forced to resign his post and was subsequently arrested. He is rumoured to be held in Wengel Mermera investigation centre.

Following a Holy Synod held from 6-7 August, Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios was 'frozen' in his post after attempts to unseat him ended in failure. Abune Antonios was relieved of all administrative duties, removed from effective control of the Patriarchate and confined to a ceremonial role. In addition, the Patriarch was placed under virtual house arrest. Contrary to the Church's constitution, administrative authority currently rests in the hands of Mr Yoftahe Dimetros, a government-appointed lay person. In addition to protesting the arrest of the three Medhane Alem priests, the Patriarch is also reported to have resisted government pressure to close down the Medhane Alem church.

On 4 September police broke into a clandestine wedding ceremony in a private home and arrested a bridal couple (Mengesteab Tesfamariam and Berekti Almaze, both from the Hallelujah church), and eighteen others. The guests included Aklilu Habteab and Kahsay

Imbaye, key Hallelujah Church leaders, as well as Evangelist Zerit Gebrenegusse of the Philadelphia Church. The entire wedding party was taken to Asmara's 5<sup>th</sup> Police Station. According to Erishalom.com, a Christian Eritrean website, eyewitnesses reported that during the course of these arrests, a young man named Kahsay was severely assaulted in front of the other guests.

In early October Eritrean Human Rights NGO Release-Eritrea (UK) received reports of a massive police round up of Christians. Over 200 people were said to have been arrested on streets, in workplaces, and in their residences. Single mothers were also included in the round-up.

Police were also reported to have raided the Asmara offices of the Rhema church, where they arrested the office administrator, Ms Akberet Nigusse, and a female visitor from Massawa. They removed equipment, computers and documents from the premises.

At around the same time, Release-Eritrea (UK) received reports of the forcible closure on 3 October of the Kale Hiwot Church's development project. The project was responsible for an extensive emergency aid and feeding programme, an orphanage housing several hundred children, primary schools, and pre-school facilities. The entire staff, including auxiliary members such as drivers and secretaries, was detained without charge. Amongst those detained were the general secretary of the project, Mr. Ukbay, and his administrator, Mr. Ghebre Michael. Also detained were Pastor Simeon, Evangelist Tekilit, Ms. Yirgalem, and Ms. Yordanos. Pastor Simeon had been arrested and released on two previous occasions. Some of the detained were released within two weeks. Others were conditionally released on 8 November. A week after the arrest, police escorted members of the project to the office where equipment, computers and documents were closely examined. In early November sources in Asmara confirmed that all of the female prisoners and two men detained during the raids on both church offices had been released after managing to post bail and signing undertakings not to attend services of unregistered churches. They had endured weeks of interrogation.

Prior to this mass arrest, several members of the Full Gospel Church in Massawa who had accompanied a newly-wed couple on their honeymoon were arrested by Eritrean security forces. According to the website [www.EritreanChristians.com](http://www.EritreanChristians.com), the bride was released on the following day to enable the authorities to identify other Christians who might visit her at home. The bride and those who visited her were later rounded up and jailed. In a separate incident, two members of Rhema Church in Massawa were detained also.

On 4 October the Rev. Nelson Fernandez, vicar of St. George's Asmara, an Indian national and Eritrea's only Anglican minister, was informed he had to leave the country before 15 October. His growing Sunday evening service had begun to attract an average of 250 young Eritreans. According to local sources, non-Eritreans will no longer be permitted to conduct religious services. The Department of Religious Affairs has instructed the President of the Evangelical Lutheran Church to take over the pulpit of St George's.

In November Compass Direct received information indicating that 1,778 Christians were imprisoned in Eritrea. The number was said to include 26 full time pastors and Orthodox clergy. According to this information 561 Christians are held in Wi'a; 333 at Mai Serwa; 238 at Gelalo; 175 at Adi Abeito; 100 at the Massawa police station; 95 at Track C Military Camp; 72 in police stations around Asmara; 69 at Sawa; 46 at Assab, 35 in the Mendefera police station; 27 in the Keren police station and 27 in Wengel Mermera. During the same month it was reported that Pastor Oqbamichel Tekle Himanot, who had suffered a breakdown following ten months of mistreatment in solitary confinement, was released. In

order to make bail the Pastor is reported to have signed a document promising that he would not attend any illegal Christian meetings in the future.

#### **10.4. 2006**

In January 2006 Compass Direct reported that over a two-week period at least 40 pastors, elders and leading laymen from the Church of the Living God and the Full Gospel, Rhema, Hallelujah and Philadelphia Church had been taken into detention from their homes or offices in Asmara. One pastor from the Church of the Living God is said to have escaped shortly after his arrest, and police subsequently arrested a member of his church board and one of his parishioners. Police also raided and closed a number of Christian businesses including a music shop run by members of the Philadelphia Church that was the main source of Christian materials, music tapes and books in Asmara. Owners and staff members of these businesses were detained and, according to information received by the Eritrean NGO Release-Eritrea (UK), up to 150 people may have been picked up from their homes, work places and streets during this purge.

Following a meeting of the Holy Synod that was convened in contravention of canon law, the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church was forced out of office and officially placed under house arrest in January 2006. Orthodox priests are paid by the state and CSW has since received information indicating that the Government may be attempting to legitimise the dismissal of Patriarch Antonios by threatening to withhold salaries from Orthodox priests and to lift their exemption as clergymen from Eritrea's obligatory military service unless they agree to sign documents stating that the Patriarch and the three priests jailed in November 2004 were guilty of teaching heresy at the Medhane Alem Orthodox Church.

In February 2006 Eritrean military authorities jailed 75 Protestants at Sawa Military Camp for "reading Bibles and praying during their free time".

During the night of 7 February, plain-clothes policemen are reported to have taken Evangelist Ermias of the Full Gospel Church from his home and detained him.

The website [www.Ershalom.com](http://www.Ershalom.com) reported that on 13 February, during a prayer meeting in one village around ten people including women and babies were arrested during a prayer meeting in a village. Amongst those detained were two Kale Hiwot ministers, Pastor Simon and Mr Ghebremichael.

Also in February, the website [www.Amsarino.com](http://www.Amsarino.com) received reports of the stringent regime of house arrest imposed upon the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church, with the government controlling everyone and everything entering or exiting his home – including food. Abune Antonios was also reported to be suffering severely from diabetes and hypertension. There was general concern that the Government may be seeking to hasten the Patriarch's demise in order to facilitate the appointment of a more pliable prelate. The Government may have already installed a de facto replacement for the Patriarch. On 22 April the official government news agency reported that 'His Holiness Abune Dioscoros, Head of the EOC Holy Synod', had given the traditional Easter Benedictions. In a powerful letter challenging the grounds for his dismissal Patriarch Antonios had implored Dioscoros to refrain from his "negative activities". A few months later Gerald Goetzen, a British missionary who was visiting Asmara, was jailed for three days and subsequently deported. During a chance meeting with President Afewerki he had offended him by requesting permission to visit the imprisoned Patriarch. While in jail he met 35 young Christians, male and female, who had been already been detained for several months, but whose faith remained vibrant.

On 23 February Daniel Hailemicael, senior pastor of the Word of Power Charismatic Church was taken from his home and detained at Asmara's Police Station No. 2.

WWW.EritreanChristians.com reported that on 13 March, the secretary and treasurer of the Full Gospel Church, Ms. Ghidey, and a Philadelphia Church member named Ms. Aresema were detained by government agents.

Compass Direct reported that in early April "informed sources" had confirmed that 70 Muslims who had objected to the installation of a government-appointed Grand Mufti have been held in one cell at Wengel Mermera for the last two years, where they were receiving "harsh treatment" from security police and guards. The group's leader is reported to have been particularly singled out for torture.

Also in April the Eritrean Government jailed three more leaders of the Orthodox Church's Medhane Alem renewal movement. They were among 65 key members of the movement that had been "excommunicated" in March. The three men were accused of instigating open resistance to the excommunication notice.

On 8 May, three Protestant women were arrested, reportedly for being involved with Nefasit's Full Gospel Church. According to Compass Direct all three were mothers and were forced to leave their young children behind at home. Two days later while still in prison, Ghenet Gebremariam's 6-month-old son died of unknown causes in their home. On news of the baby's death, police released the mother on bail.

Later in May, Release-Eritrea (UK) reported that 54 evangelical and Pentecostal collage students from Mai Nefhi College had been arrested for refusing to take part in Independence Day celebrations due to reasons of conscience. Many of the students were told that they would continue to receive military punishment until they agreed to participate in the activities.

In June evidence emerged of the pressures faced by the Catholic Church when it was reported that the government had ignored letters from the country's three Catholic bishops explaining that the bearing of arms by Catholic priests was "not in accordance" with the role of the clergy.

In September Compass Direct reported that the Kale Hiwot Church had been issued a written order by the Government confiscating all of its property and physical assets. The order targeted the possessions of the church's relief department, which had functioned for more than twenty years as a legally recognised NGO under the Eritrean Relief and Rehabilitation Commission.

In October the Eritrean Gospel singer, Helen Berhane, was transferred to a hospital in Asmara in a serious condition. According to reports, Ms. Berhane showed signs of having suffered severe physical mistreatment and was seen in the hospital on a wheelchair. She was not allowed to receive visitors. Ms. Berhane was briefly returned to prison before being released into the custody of her family in Asmara.

On 17 October Eritrean security police tortured two Christians to death in a military camp outside the town of Adi-Quala. According to Compass Direct, Immanuel Andegergesh, 23, and Kibrom Firemichel, 30, had originally been arrested on 15 October for holding a religious service in their home south of Asmara. It was reported that the two men died from torture wounds and severe dehydration.

Towards the end of October, Compass Direct reported that Eritrean authorities had detained 150 Christians from at least five of the country's outlawed churches in the town of Mendefera. Some of the detained Christians were subjected to beatings and other physical mistreatment. At least ten nursing mothers were among the new prisoners and all were forced to leave their infants behind.

Release-Eritrea (UK) reported in early November that at least fifty children between the ages of eight months and nine years were detained as a result of various raids in and around the Asmara region.

December began with the arrests of nine employees of Samaritan's Purse, an international Christian aid agency that had been ordered to leave the country in November.

In late December the Government effectively took control of the financial affairs of the Orthodox Church. Compass Direct reported that an ultimatum had been issued stipulating that all offerings and tithes collected through the Church should henceforth be deposited directly into a government account.

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During the first weeks of January, Compass Direct reported that police and military authorities jailed 68 more Christians in three operations. Included in the arrests were eight government workers from the northern town of Keren. Attempts were made during interrogations to force them to identify local leaders of the Medhane Alem Orthodox renewal movement. That same day police in Assab arrested 25 Christians who were subsequently pressured to recant their religious beliefs.

Compass Direct reported that on 4 January, random checks on "Christian extremists" among student conscripts at Sawa Military Centre uncovered 250 Bibles. After burning the Bibles in front of the entire military camp, the commanders arrested 35 of the teenage students and subjected them to severe military punishment, including physical torture.

In late January, two Protestant church leaders, Pastor Simon Tsegay and Gebremichel Yohannes, were released. Soon afterwards, Full Gospel Church Pastor Fanuel Mehreteab was released from Sembel Prison in Asmara, two years after his arrest in January 2005 in the town of Dekemhare. Compass Direct reported that soon afterwards, all three were forced to surrender property deeds to guarantee required bail.

Pastor Habtom Tesfamichel, one of the founders of the Full Gospel Church, was taken into custody in Asmara on 23 January. The 57-year-old was initially briefly detained during a wake for one of his wife's relatives. He was later taken into custody when reporting at a police station, as previously directed. According to Compass Direct he is being held in the capital's Wengel Mermera prison, along with nearly two dozen other Christian pastors and priests known to be detained there.

On 4 February Release-Eritrea (UK) reported that as a couple was concluding their wedding celebrations, members of the Eritrean police and security forces invaded the premises and arrested everyone there. Among those detained with the bride and groom were around thirty of their close relatives.

Compass Direct reported that Christian Magos Solomon Semere died in prison on 15 February, four and a half years after being jailed for worshipping in a banned Protestant church. Local Christians confirmed his death at the Adi-Nefase Military Confinement facility

just outside Assab. According to one source, Semere, 30, died “due to physical torture and persistent pneumonia, for which he was forbidden proper medical treatment”.

In February the website [www.Asmarino.com](http://www.Asmarino.com) received reports from Asmara stating that government forces had entered the residence of the Orthodox Patriarch and forcibly removed his insignia and vestments of office. Yoftahe Dimetros was reported to have authorised the seizure.

In March the Catholic NGO Aid to the Church in Need reported that the Catholic Church was continuing to resist government demands for a comprehensive list of its clergy and their whereabouts. The church was also refusing a request to either reduce the number of Catholic priests or send them to military service.

On 24 April, a renegade bishop was declared the new Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church sixteen months after Patriarch Antonios' illegal removal from office. According to [www.Asmarino.com](http://www.Asmarino.com) Bishop Dioscoros was selected as Patriarch in the presence of government officials and other “reluctant” bishops who “took no part in the decision”.

Release-Eritrea (UK) reported that the Presbyterian Mehrete Yesus Church in Asmara, was raided by government forces during a Sunday Service on 29 April. Around 80 people were detained, including several foreign nationals and the head of the Eritrean Evangelical Alliance. The leader of the church, the Rev. Zecharias Abraham, had been serving as head of the Eritrean Evangelical Alliance, since the arrest of the previous leader, Haile Naizgi, in May 2004. At least three American citizens were also reportedly amongst those detained. All of the non-Eritreans were released soon after detention. The Rev. Zecharias, formerly an apologist for the government's policies on religious matters, was released several weeks later. According to one unconfirmed report, members of his congregation were released only after signing undertakings to renounce church activities.

At least twenty Christians were arrested by Eritrean security forces in a raid in Dekemhare on the early hours of 27 May, including young children. According to reports, security forces had expected to find Christians participating in a prayer meeting. However, when they failed to uncover such activity, they proceeded to detain everyone in the home they had raided as well as other people in the surrounding neighbourhood. Those targeted were said to be members of the Kale Hiwot Church. Among them was Pastor Michael Abraha, who suffers from hypoglycaemia. Given the shortage of food and medical supplies in Eritrean prisons, there were considerable concerns for his health. It is reported that he may now have been released.

Also on 27 May, the legitimate patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios, was forcibly removed from his residence and transported to an undisclosed location. The Patriarch suffers from severe diabetes and hypertension. Fears have been expressed for his continued well-being.