

# Briefing

## Eritrea

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## **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 countries worldwide. It is also rated the second worst abuser of religious liberties on the African continent, after Somalia.<sup>i</sup>

### **A Deteriorating Human Rights Climate**

Eritrea won independence from Ethiopia in 1993 after a lengthy and heroic war and there were high hopes that it would be a beacon of democracy and good governance for a continent that had experienced little of this. However, a costly post-independence war with Ethiopia depleted the country's resources, and 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, the country's commendable Constitution was ratified but never implemented. 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 it, and accepted in theory by the government that drafted them, have been totally disregarded.

Large-scale human rights violations are taking place throughout the country. There has been no freedom of speech in Eritrea since September 2001, when the government banned the country's independent media, imprisoning over a dozen journalists who remain in incommunicado detention to this day. As the Paris-based organisation Reporters Without Borders 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>ii</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. Moreover, in September 2004 Jonah Fisher, a BBC and Reuters correspondent and the last remaining foreign journalist left Eritrea after the government unexpectedly withdrew his accreditation.

Freedom of expression and the voicing of opposing political views were also effectively ended in September 2001, when the government imprisoned 11 former members of the ruling party who had urged greater democratisation. They too are currently held incommunicado and without charge. After arresting the 11 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.

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 11 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 are estimated to be several hundred political prisoners alone currently detained in Eritrea.<sup>iii</sup>

### **Severe Repression of Religious Freedom**

In addition to the political prisoners, there are estimated to be upwards of 350 prisoners of conscience and belief currently in Eritrea.<sup>iv</sup> This number includes some 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.

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 persuasions. This effectively rendered the country's Evangelical, Pentecostal, Anglican, Adventist and other

churches illegal, heralding the beginning of severe and increasing persecution, particularly of Pentecostal and Evangelical denominations. Although the government initially 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 government has 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 many of the other 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. On average 300 to 400 of these Christians are in detention in Eritrea at any one time. Most were detained during 2003. Government forces have even raided weddings, New Year celebrations and other social gatherings to arrest those attending. In some instances entire households have been arrested whilst holding family devotional times in their homes. None of the detainees has been formally charged with an offence, neither has any one of them been brought before a 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. **(Please see Appendix for a catalogue of repression and the arbitrary detention of Christians since 2003)**

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 basis 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's 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.v

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. A more open form of persecution began in the armed services in 1999, when an order was allegedly issued forbidding Christians from specific protestant denominations to practice 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 spiritual 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.

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 in an effort to force them to abandon their faith. The Red Sea climate renders the shipping containers oppressively hot by day and extremely cold by night. Several people have been forced to recant as a result 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's Witnesses are 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 expressions of Christianity by the end of 2005. Persecution has increased markedly since then (see **Appendix**).

## **Torture**

Incarceration in metal shipping containers is just one of several means of torture employed by the Eritrean regime. Torture appears to be used systematically against anyone deemed to be a critic of the government, and particularly against dissenters in the armed forces. Amnesty International recently exposed several of their methods. Some prisoners are reported to have 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 outside for up to several weeks), and the "Jesus Christ" (a position resembling crucifixion). Other forms of torture documented by Amnesty are the "Otto" (Italian for "eight"), where the victim is tied with hands behind the back and left face down on the ground, but without the legs tied and the "Ferro" (Italian for "iron"), where the wrists are bound behind the back with handcuffs while the victim is beaten with sticks or whipped with an electric wire on the back and buttocks while lying on the ground face down. There is also the "Torch" or "Number eight", which occurs inside a special torture room. The victim is tied up by wrists behind the back and with the feet bound. 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 beaten with sticks or whips.<sup>vi</sup>

It has been reported that prisoners from 'forbidden churches' and others have been deliberately exposed to malaria-carrying mosquitoes. It has also been reported that imprisoned Christians held in Assab Military Prison have been placed in 44-gallon drums and rolled in front of other prisoners. Some victims are reported to have been partially paralysed as a result of physical assaults and torture. Several female prisoners are reported to have also suffered sexual abuse.

Sadly, from being a promising young democracy Eritrea has deteriorated in a matter of years into a country where widespread violations of human rights occur routinely in an atmosphere of impunity. For its part, on 1 May 2003 the Eritrean government issued a blanket denial 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 continued since then to react in an increasingly belligerent manner to all criticisms or supplications made on behalf of those suffering as a result of its policies. When, in September, 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.' The Eritrean statement went on to claim that the US decision did 'not come as a surprise to Eritrea as it has been no secret that the CIA and its operatives have been long engaged in fabricating defamatory statements in a bid to embark on other agendas and at the same time conceal its unwarranted intervention.'

On 7 October 2004 the Patriarch of Eritrea Orthodox Church, the Mufti of Eritrea, the Bishop of the Eritrea Catholic Church and the President of Evangelical Lutheran Church issued a statement criticizing the International Religious Freedom report. The leaders began by stating that while they believed in religious freedom and condemned any violation of this fundamental right, 'the right to religious freedom, like other freedoms, is not absolute. It is limited by the need to respect the rights of other persons. According to these leaders the proscribed groups are 'intolerant of other beliefs and believers. They add that in reality it is these 'alien and externally driven sects' that are violating religious freedom in Eritrea. In an indication of the political exigencies behind the document, the leaders conclude 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.

However, leaders of the forbidden churches deny all of the charges leveled against them and many observers feel that given the extent of the current repression, the four religious leaders had little alternative but to issue the letter. Moreover, by the end of 2004 it became apparent that even members of permitted churches were not immune to persecution (see **Appendix**).

### **Arbitrary Detention**

The tiny country has more or less become a maze of prisons. As conventional prisons overflow with political prisoners, prisoners of conscience and belief and alleged draft dodgers, police cells, army camps and even villas are being used as makeshift detention centres.

Since 1998 the government has made a habit of conducting arbitrary mass round ups of people within the age of enlistment in order to find 'draft dodgers.' Tensions increased on the border with Ethiopia during the first few months of 2005 and a build up of troops has been taking place on both sides of the border. Consequently, in February the Eritrean government conducted its latest mass roundup, and has now ordered all men aged between 40 and 60 to report for duty.

A round up that occurred towards the close of the 2004 ended in tragedy and drew international attention to events in Eritrea. On 4 November the government is reported to have indiscriminately rounded up thousands of people under the age of 50 and incarcerated them in the infamous Adi Abeito army camp/prison, situated just outside Asmara, for several hours. 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 the 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 five guards. The rest of the guards began firing indiscriminately at the crowd, killing between 20 and 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-arrest. The government has attempted to dismiss reports on the incident as 'overblown', and has insisted on describing the victims of the round up as 'gangsters' and draft dodgers. The country was reported to be extremely tense following this incident.

In the aftermath of this event the European Parliament passed a Resolution condemning human rights abuses in Eritrea. The Resolution demanded a full investigation into the incident and expressed anxiety regarding the well being of alleged draft dodgers who continue to be held in detention. It also called on Eritrea to abide by the international human rights conventions, and to immediately release the 11 former members of the ruling party imprisoned without charge since September 2001. However, in a response from Yemane Gebremeskel, President Isaias Afewerki's chief of staff, the Eritrean government characteristically dismissed the resolution as "extremely inappropriate." Gebremeskel went on to say that only two people had died during the incident and added that the Resolution would 'only reduce the influence of the European Parliament'.

The 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 USA. 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 America, tried unsuccessfully to reunite her family in the United States. However, President Isaias Afewerki refused the children permission to leave Eritrea. Aster then sought and received assurances from the Eritrean Ambassador to the USA 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 recently, when reports emerged that she had finally been removed from an extended period of solitary confinement but was still being kept away from the main prison population.

The government is also automatically suspicious of Eritreans who live abroad and merely return to the country for a visit. For example, Amnesty International reports that in May 2003, Saleh Ali Sheikh, and his wife, Saret Ramadhan, were reportedly detained on arrival from Saudi Arabia at Asmara airport and have since disappeared.

Today, Eritreans are fleeing the country that they fought valiantly to liberate. According to the US Committee on Refugees World Refugee Survey of 2004, nearly 280,000 Eritreans were refugees by the end of 2003, including some 270,000 in Sudan, nearly 7,000 in Ethiopia, and some 3,000 seeking asylum in various Western countries. In an indication of the abysmal human rights climate currently prevailing in Eritrea, some refugees are so desperate to leave that they risk crossing the Sahara Desert on foot, travelling via Sudan to Libya. Those who are rejected by host nations are subjected to appalling treatment by the government upon their return. For example, in 2002 over 220 Eritreans, including asylum seekers 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 in the Red Sea island of Nakhura. Recent escapees from the prison report harsh conditions, including forced labour and confinement in underground cells in the sweltering heat of the desert. The Libyan authorities are reported to have forcibly returned over 110 people on 21 July 2004. If true, it is likely that they too are now in incommunicado detention and are at risk of torture. Small wonder that a recent group of returnees from Libya hijacked the aeroplane that would have taken them back to Eritrea and headed for Sudan, where they applied for protection as refugees, but were instead put on trial.

## 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.

## Recommendations

- I. 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
  - **An End to Arbitrary Arrest and Detention:** 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
  - **An End to Indefinite Detention Without Charge:** 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 fairness - or set them free. In some instances children have been arrested (**see Appendix**). This contravenes Eritrea's undertakings under the Convention of the Rights of the Child

- **An End to the Use of Torture:** Eritrea has acceded to treaties that prohibit this unsavoury practice, namely, the ICCPR (Article 7) and the African Charter (Article 5)
2. **Linked Aid:** 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 improving the capacity of independent local human rights organisations or defenders.
  3. **The Border Issue:** In order to remove a source of instability that has contributed towards government insecurity 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 that Ethiopia not only acquiesces to the international ruling on the border between the two countries, which the President of Ethiopia has now said he accepts 'in principle', but also permits its actual demarcation, and adheres to it.

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<sup>i</sup> World Watch List, January 2005, Open Doors International

<sup>ii</sup> 'Africa's biggest prison for the press since September 2001', Africa Press release, Reporters Without Borders, 20 September 2004

<sup>iii</sup> Estimates from information on detainees and the 'disappeared' obtained by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch

<sup>iv</sup> Estimates from information obtained by Amnesty International, Compass Direct, CSW, and World Evangelical Alliance

<sup>v</sup> 'The EPLF and Religious Policy in Eritrea', 17 December 2004, **Release Eritrea**; 'Current Situation of Orthodox Churches', 17 December 2004, **Release Eritrea**;

'Full Blown Assault on Religion in Eritrea', Fr. Halleyesus Oqbai, 23 February 2003, **Asmarino**

<sup>vi</sup> Eritrea: 'You have no right to ask' – Government resists scrutiny on human rights', Amnesty International, May 2004

**Updated March 2005**

**Appendix**

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## CATALOGUE OF REPRESSION SINCE 2003

During January 2003 50 members of the charismatic Rhema Church were jailed for 10 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 NGO 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 15 days in metal 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, 15 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.

April 26 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, signing 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 an indication that even members of a 'permitted' denomination are no longer safe from persecution in Eritrea.

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 in 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 12 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.

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Compass Direct also reported that in mid November the principal of Bakra Secondary School accused 12 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 14 December 13 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 10 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.

On 15 February police in Asmara arrested Pastor Mengis Tewoldemedhin of the Hallelujah Church and his congregation as they worshiped in secret in a house in the Edaga Hamuse district. The 34 men and 17 women were held at Adi Abeito military prison until February 18, when Pastor Tewoldemedhin was separated from the group and locked in an underground cell. According to an unconfirmed report from a local source members of the congregation under 18 were sent to Sawa for forcible military training; those over 18 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.

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 20 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.

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On 22 April 2004 Mr. Teklemaraïam Merkehazion a 62-year-old official in the Orthodox Church was summoned for questioning by government security and subsequently disappeared. 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. Merkehazion 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. Rev. Haile Naizge, chairman of the Full Gospel Church, Dr. Kuflu Gebremeskel, chairman of the Eritrean Evangelical Alliance, 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. Rev. Naizge's mother, who was seriously ill at the time of his detention, has since died without being allowed to see her son. The father of Rev. Hagos has also died.

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 recently 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. In January 2005 came unconfirmed reports that Ms Berhane may have been released.

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 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 are reported to have been detained in Wengel Mermera. Then on 6, 7 and 9 September a series of raids are 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, are 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 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

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detained Orthodox priests were based the Medhane Alem Church. The Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church is 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.

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 at police station No. 1. On the same day Compass Direct reported a similar swoop, this time on a wedding ceremony in Barentu, western Eritrea. 67 evangelical men, women and children were detained, including the bride and groom. Amongst those arrested were Pastors Oqbamichel and Simon from the Kale Hiwot Church and Pastor Hagos Tuomai of the Full Gospel Church. The group was allegedly taken to Sawa military camp for 'military punishment'.

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 29 January, 15 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 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. He was released on bail on or around 28 February but is not permitted to discuss his time in detention.

On 4 February Compass Direct reported that 14 members of the Kale Hiwot Church in Adi-Teklezan had been arrested while taking part in a Bible study at the home of their pastor.

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 18 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 2 and 14 were released and told to report back to the police station with their parents on

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the following Monday. 30 children aged between 14 and 18 were gradually released during March. Their teachers remain in jail.

On 9 March, 10 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 16 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, Rev. Kidane Weldou from the streets of Asmara. Neither his family nor his Church has been informed of his whereabouts or of the charges against him. Compass Direct reports 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 Mermera. Both he and 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.

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 currently detained in Eritrea. Sixteen of them are pastors.