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ERITREA Christian facing deportation from Saudi Arabia

Eyob Mussie, an Eritrean Christian refugee in Saudi Arabia who was facing a possible death penalty for proselytizing, has been informed that he will be returned to Eritrea instead.

Mr. Mussie, whose is believed to be 33 years of age, has been held in a deportation centre for the last ten days while arrangements are made for his return to Eritrea, where returnees can face imprisonment, torture and possible death.

On February 12, 2011 Eyob Mussie was arrested in Saudi Arabia for proselytizing, an offence which carries the death penalty. After psychiatric tests conducted 15 days after his arrest confirmed Mr. Mussie's sanity, there were reports that he would receive the death penalty. However, it appears that the Saudi authorities have decided instead to deport him.

Although he will escape the death penalty in Saudi Arabia, there is a very real danger that Mr. Mussie will suffer severe mistreatment if returned to Eritrea.

Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki presides over one of the most repressive regimes in the world, where citizens require exit visas to leave the country and are regularly subject to arbitrary and indefinite imprisonment, torture and forced labor. In a crackdown on free press and civil society in 2001, the Eritrean government imprisoned journalists and key members of the political opposition. Then in 2002, the government banned all Christian denominations except Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism and Evangelical Lutheranism, and ended all other religious practices apart from Sunni Islam. An estimated 3,000 Christians are currently imprisoned without charge or trial in detention centers where torture is routinely in use. Some detainees have been held incommunicado for a number of years. Many young Eritreans are victims of the country's indefinite military service regime, which should officially last for a year and a half, but in reality can last for over ten years, with conscripts receiving negligible pay and facing harsh treatment, including forced labor.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "We commend the Saudi government for sparing Mr. Mussie's life. However, deporting him to Eritrea means he has effectively been granted only a brief reprieve from danger since the Eritrean authorities will certainly subject him to cruel and inhumane treatment. As a signatory to the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), we urge Saudi Arabia not to return Mr. Mussie to a country where there is a strong likelihood he will face severe mistreatment, and appeal to the Saudi authorities to consider alternative countries of asylum for Mr. Mussie."

Notes to Editors:

1. Article 3 of the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) reads:

No State Party shall expel, return ("refouler") or extradite a person to another State where there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture.

For the purpose of determining whether there are such grounds, the competent authorities shall take into account all relevant considerations including, where applicable, the existence in the State concerned of a consistent pattern of gross, flagrant or mass violations of human rights