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ERITREA | CSW Calls for Compliance with African Commission Rulings

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is calling for international pressure on the government of Eritrea to ensure it complies with rulings passed by the African Commission calling for prominent politicians and journalists who have been detained incommunicado for the last 13 years to be released and compensated.

On Sept. 18, 2001, the Eritrean government jailed 11 influential ministers and generals, known collectively as the G-15, who had signed an open letter to members of the ruling party calling for democratization, respect for human rights and rule of law. The government also closed every independent news agency, claiming this was a temporary measure brought about because of their failure to abide by the press laws, and jailed 10 journalists, transforming the nation into one of a handful worldwide with no independent media outlets.

The detainees were initially held in a former training center in Embat'kala Town, where three reportedly died. Survivors were transferred to the purpose-built and remote Era Ero Prison, which has been described as a death camp designed to inflict a slow and painful demise on its inmates. Detainees are subjected to multiple privations and to inhuman and degrading treatment. According to credible reports, they are referred to by numbers instead of names and can only wash once a week. Their hands are reportedly cuffed in front of their bodies during the day and behind their backs at night. They are held in indefinite solitary confinement, not allowed to see other prisoners and receive no form of mental stimulation. Guards are ordered not to converse with them. They are also subjected to torture. Fifteen of the 35 Eritrean political detainees reportedly died either by suicide or as a result of the harsh conditions, while others are said to be suffering severe health challenges.

In a 2003 ruling on the 11 detained politicians, the African Commission found Eritrea to be in violation of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (ACHPR) and urged the government to free the individuals immediately and pay them compensation. In a 2007 ruling, the Commission stressed that no political situation justified the wholesale violation of human rights and called for the detained journalists to either be released or brought to a speedy and fair trial. The Commission also called on Eritrea to lift its press ban, to grant the detainees immediate access to their families and legal representatives, and to ensure they received compensation. However, the Eritrean government continues to ignore both decisions.

In her 2013 report, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea stated that she had asked Eritrean officials about the whereabouts of the politicians and journalists detained since 2001, inquired of their state of health, of whether they had access to medical care whether their families could see them. The Special Rapporteur also asked why they had

not been brought before an independent court of law to face valid charges but has yet to receive an answer.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "The events of September 18 2001 are emblematic of the betrayal of the hope of a nation that had sacrificed so much for a democratic dispensation that remains elusive. The fact that these people, several of whom contributed significantly to the emergence of the Eritrean state, are still unjustly detained and subjected to unimaginable cruelty is wholly unacceptable. Their continuing incommunicado detention is not only in violation of African Commission rulings; it is also a flagrant violation of Eritrea's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the ACHPR. By all accounts, many may have already died. For the sake of those still living, the international community must exert pressure on the Eritrean government to ensure they are compensated, released, or speedily tried in accordance with the Commission's rulings."