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ERITREA | Christian Mother Dies in Prison

Fikadu Debesay, who was detained with her husband in May during raids targeting Evangelical Christians in Adi Quala town, Eritrea, died while incarcerated.

The mother of three reportedly died earlier this week in Metkel Abiet, a desert camp situated between the towns of Gahtelai and Shieb in the Northern Red Sea Region, and was buried Aug. 10 in Mendefera. While the cause of her death is unknown, the camp where she was detained is situated in an area known for its oppressive heat and aridity.

A campaign of house-to-house raids targeting members of non-sanctioned churches was initiated in several towns in May. This marks a significant intensification of a crackdown that has been ongoing since May 2002, when the Eritrean government effectively outlawed religious practices not affiliated with the Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran and Orthodox Christian denominations or Sunni Islam.

During the first week of August, 23 Christians were rounded up in the capital city, Asmara. In July, 16 female national service conscripts in their late teens were taken from their place of assignment in Adi Halo, a village 20 miles from Asmara, and detained in Metkel Abiet camp. Other Christians and family members who attempted to visit them were also imprisoned. The detainees' hair was forcibly shaved off in what local sources describe as an additional "sign of humiliation in a society where a woman's hair is regarded as a sign of decency and sanity."

The number of Christians known to have been detained in desert camps and military facilities since May has risen to 210. Most were detained following raids on their homes, while a few were arrested at prayer meetings. Like Fikadu Debesay, several are parents, and according to local sources, over 50 children are currently without one or both parents as a result of these raids.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW is saddened to hear of the death of Fikadu Debesay. Our thoughts and prayers are with her family at this painful time. We think particularly of her children, who are mourning their mother in the absence of their detained father, and of the other children whose parent or parents are unjustly incarcerated. It is alarming to note that conditions and treatment in detention are so inhumane that they can cause a mental breakdown. Clearly, human rights and fundamental freedoms continue to be violated comprehensively in Eritrea, and the situation of freedom of religion or belief is deteriorating. Once again we urge the international community to ensure that the government and its officials are made to account for the crimes perpetrated against Eritrean citizens, and to maintain pressure on the regime until every prisoner of conscience is freed without precondition."