



### 3.6.18

## ERITREA | Muslim Elder Dies in Detention

Haji Musa Mohammed Nur, the highly-respected nonagenarian Honorary President of Al Diaa Islamic School in Asmara, has died in detention. Initial reports state that he died March 2. However, according to Gedab News Haji Musa may have died March 1, and security officers secretly transferred his body to a government hospital March 2 where it remained until Friday prayers had concluded in order to prevent potential protests. Haji Musa, whose arrest sparked rare protests in October 2017, had been held in Asmara's 5th Police Station since Oct. 20, 2017.

Haji Musa's family was informed of his death March 3, and he was buried that day in Asmara's Sheikh Alamin cemetery. The turnout for his funeral was described as unprecedented, with reports of military vehicles strategically positioned to intervene if protests broke out. Gun fire reigned around the Akhria neighborhood where Haji Musa resided, and there were mass arrests. Reports indicate that as many as 1,000 people may have been detained in Adi Abeito Prison, including several minors.

Haji Musa was detained for opposing the government's attempt to expropriate the Al Diaa Islamic School in accordance with a 2014 plan devised by the Ministry of Education to transfer control of every school to local communities and resisting pressure for female students to stop wearing the hijab. Al Diaa was established in the late 1960s and is run by parent committees as a private Islamic school. Transferring control to local communities would mean religious schools, such as Al Diaa, would become nondenominational and open to the public.

In an impassioned speech delivered to thousands gathered in the school grounds on Oct. 15, 2017, Haji Musa said, "These girls who are coming to school veiled, they are Muslims; they are our daughters. It is their religion, and nobody will touch them." He also stressed that the school had been built and maintained by the Muslim community, "... and because we have full rights, there is nothing that should frighten or scare us."

Haji Musa was not the first member of his family to die in detention. His younger brother, Taha Mohammed Nur, played a significant role in initiating Eritrea's armed struggle against Ethiopian rule. As a trained lawyer and member of post-war commissions on the referendum and the national constitution, he was also instrumental in establishing the state of Eritrea. Taha Mohammed Nur's arrest in November 2005 came shortly after he had undergone major heart surgery and reportedly occurred as he attempted to fly to Italy for further treatment. He died in prison in 2008. Although his body was returned to his family, no autopsy took place and the cause of his death remains unknown.

Haji Musa's death comes weeks after news emerged of the death of another prominent prisoner. Former Foreign Minister Haile Woldentsae Durue had been detained incommunicado since Sept. 18, 2001, when the government jailed senior pro-reform political figures and independent journalists. Woldentsae, who reportedly lost his sight due to mistreatment, is said to have died Jan. 25 and to have been buried in the bushes surrounding Era Ero, a remote, purpose-built prison that has been described as a death camp, designed to ensure the slow and painful demise of its inmates. At least 15 of Woldentsae's fellow detainees are also thought to have died due to mistreatment, extreme heat, insufficient food and water, and lack of medication.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "CSW is deeply saddened by news of the deaths of Haji Musa and Haile Woldentsae, and we extend our condolences to their families and communities. Both have paid the ultimate price for standing courageously against a government deemed guilty of committing crimes against humanity since 1991. It is distressing to note that almost 27 years after achieving independence against major odds, the Eritrean people still do not enjoy the dividends of their hard-won freedom, and remain under the yoke of a deeply repressive regime. We reiterate our call for renewed international efforts to establish justice mechanisms to hold to account regime members and agents who have been identified as having grossly violated the rights of Eritrean citizens."