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Two Jehovah's Witnesses die in detention

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (30.04.2018) - Two elderly Jehovah's Witnesses, who had been in detention since 2008, are reported to have died in early 2018 in Mai Serwa Prison near the Eritrean capital, Asmara.

According to a [press release](#) from the Jehovah's Witnesses, dated 25 April, 76 year-old Habtemichael Tesfamariam died suddenly on 3 January, and is believed to have suffered a stroke. He leaves behind his wife, Leterberhan Bezabih, four sons and three daughters.

Habtemichael Mekonen, aged 77, died on 6 March, reportedly due to kidney failure. He is survived by his wife, Mihret Ellias, a son and a daughter.

Both men had been detained without charge or trial since 2008. Mr Mekonen was arrested at his home in July 2008, while Mr Tesfamariam was arrested at his home in August 2008. Both were eventually transferred to the notorious Meitir Prison Camp, situated in the desert north of Asmara, where they were subjected to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. For example, from October 2011 to August 2012, the two men were held in a partially buried building along with other Jehovah's Witnesses, where they suffered severely from heat during summer, and from a lack of sufficient food and water.

In 2017, the Jehovah's Witnesses were transferred to Mai Serwa Prison, where they are permitted to receive food packages and access medical treatment when critically ill. However, neither Mr Tesfamariam nor Mr Mekonen recovered fully from their earlier mistreatment.

Jehovah's Witnesses have been subjected to severe mistreatment on account of doctrinal exigencies which meant that they did not vote in Eritrea's independence referendum in 1993, and announced they would participate only in non-military aspects of national service, in accordance with conscientious objection.

In October 1994, a directive from President Isaias Afewerki effectively deprived Jehovah's Witnesses of their civil, political, social economic and cultural rights. They could no longer access government employment, accommodation, schools, hospitals or any other services generally available to Eritrean citizens. Perhaps most significantly, they were denied the official identity cards necessary for, among other things, registration of births, deaths and marriages, purchasing property, and gaining passports, internal and external travel permits, and commercial licences. In 1995, the Minister of Internal Affairs confirmed that by "refusing to accept the government of Eritrea and the laws" Jehovah's Witnesses had "lost their right to citizenship."

The deaths of Mr Tesfamariam and Mr Mekonen reduce the number of Jehovah's Witnesses currently detained without trial in Eritrea to 53. Three of them, Paulos Eyassu,

Isaac Mogos, and Negede Teklemariam, have been incarcerated since 1994 for refusing to take part in active military service.

To date, four Jehovah's Witnesses have reportedly died in detention. Three others died soon after being*released, and at least seven continue to experience severe health challenges as a result of mistreatment in prison, years after having been released.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said: "We extend our heartfelt condolences to the families of Mr Tesfamariam and Mr Mekonen. The fact that these elderly men died while detained arbitrarily for almost a decade is both tragic and unacceptable. In its June 2016 report, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry found reasonable grounds to conclude that the government of Eritrea has been committing crimes against humanity since 1991, including the crime of persecution. The ongoing plight of the Jehovah's Witness community, which was the first faith group to experience gross violations of every conceivable right, is perhaps one of the clearest indications that nothing has changed. We urge the Eritrean government to release the remaining Jehovah's Witness prisoners, along with all other prisoners of conscience. No one should be punished for exercising their freedom to thought, conscience or religion."

Newlyweds among 32 Christians arrested in fresh crackdown

World Watch Monitor (28.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2E4Beqm> - Eritrean police have arrested 32 Christians in the capital, Asmara, this month, including a newlywed couple and ten of their guests.

Twenty were arrested on Sunday, 25 March, all of whom remain in detention.

The newly married man and two of his guests are being held in a prison north of the city. The newlyweds and ten guests were arrested at the couple's home on 5 March, a local source told World Watch Monitor.

Ten friends were visiting the couple for a traditional coffee ceremony to welcome the bride when the local security officers forced their way into the house and arrested all 12 people there. They were taken to Asmara's No. 5 Police Station.

The authorities released eight of the group two days later, after they presented valid travel IDs (documents of permission to move around Eritrea). The four remaining Christians, including the newlyweds, were moved to Adi Abeito Prison, north of Asmara. According to the World Watch Monitor source, the newlywed couple was split up after the arrest and the bride was released yesterday (27 March).

Eritrea's human rights record was recently condemned at the UN Human Rights Council. Kate Gilmore, the UN's Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, said in her opening remarks that over 100 people were arrested in Eritrea in 2017 for practising religions not officially recognised by the state.

A monitoring group for the UN, United Nations Watch, said "thousands" of Christians are also facing detention as "religious freedom continue[s] to be denied in Eritrea". The group also asked why the report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Sheila B. Keetharuth, "failed to closely assess this situation".

The UN Human Rights Council heard that the Eritrean government's claims of improvement in the human rights situation were unfounded.

Eritrea is sixth on Open Doors International's 2018 World Watch List of the 50 countries in which it is most difficult to live as a Christian. In 2002, the government introduced a law prohibiting Christian practice outside the Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran denominations, as well as Sunni Islam.

UN 'failing' Eritrea's detained Christians

World Watch Online (16.03.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2FLMmOT> - Eritrea's human rights record was again in the spotlight at the UN Human Rights Council earlier this week. Kate Gilmore, Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, said in her opening remarks that over 100 people were arrested in Eritrea in 2017 for practising religions not officially recognised by the state.

A monitoring group for the UN, United Nations Watch, said "thousands" of Christians are also facing detention as "religious freedom continue[s] to be denied in Eritrea". The group also asked why the report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, Sheila B. Keetharuth, "failed to closely assess this situation".

Christian Solidarity Worldwide, a religious freedom and human rights advocate, mentioned the arrest of dissidents and their family members and noted that the Commission of Inquiry had found that "Eritrea had committed crimes against humanity".

The Special Rapporteur did highlight the detention this month of hundreds of perceived opponents, some as young as 13, following the death, in custody, of a 93-year-old school director who defied government orders, as Reuters reported.

Haji Musa Mohamednur was the director of a private Islamic school in the Eritrean capital, Asmara. The government orders that he disobeyed included a ban on the veil and stopping of religious teachings.

His arrest in October led to student protests on the streets of Asmara – a rare sight in the strictly governed East African nation.

The UN Human Rights Council heard that the Eritrean government's claims of improvement in the human rights situation were unfounded.

Background

Eritrea is 6th on Open Doors International's 2018 World Watch List of the 50 countries in which it is most difficult to live as a Christian.

In 2002, the government introduced a law prohibiting Christian practice outside of the Orthodox, Catholic and Evangelical Lutheran denominations, as well as Sunni Islam.

But even the sanctioned Catholic Church has faced issues because of its objection to its clergy being forced to become conscripts in the indefinite and compulsory military service imposed in Eritrea.

Dubbed the “North Korea of Africa”, the Eritrean regime is authoritarian and intolerant towards any form of unregistered organisation, dissent, or free expression. There is no safe place in the country – as is confirmed by the large number of Eritrean refugees in Europe and elsewhere.

Although there are no reliable statistics on religious affiliation in the country, sources estimate that the country is half Christian and half Sunni Muslim.

Arrests of Christians escalated in 2017. A new wave of arrests that began in May saw the number of Evangelical Christian prisoners rise to more than 200. Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians are at particular risk, although the Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch, Abune Antonios, has been under house arrest since 2007 after he refused to comply with government attempts to interfere with church affairs.

In July the European Parliament passed a resolution condemning “systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations” in Eritrea. This followed a report by a UN commission that the country’s “crimes against humanity” should be investigated by the International Criminal Court.

Gravestones vandalized in Jewish cemetery

JTA (16.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2FOSt0X> - Dozens of gravestones were toppled and broken in a Jewish cemetery in Eritrea.

The damage at the cemetery located in the capital of Asmara is believed to have happened in recent days, according to two Jewish news outlets that received photos of the vandalism.

The Israel-based Haaretz [published photos](#) of the smashed gravestones, reported to be the first time that the Jewish cemetery has been targeted.

“The cemetery suffered vandalism and a large number of graves were defaced,” Danny Goldschmidt, from the Aden Jewish Heritage Museum located in Tel Aviv, told Haaretz. He said that the police have not made any arrests in the incident.

The London-based Jewish Chronicle also was sent photos of the [damage](#) by an unnamed reader in London of Eritrean descent, who did not want his name published for fear of retribution against family members who remain in Eritrea.

In addition to cemetery, the site in Asmara site is home to a now-defunct synagogue. The last Jewish family left Eritrea more than ten years ago. There reportedly is one permanent Jewish resident left in the city, who has been identified as Sami Cohen and who reportedly takes care of the cemetery and the synagogue.

The last grave was dug in the cemetery in 1996, Ynet reported in 2006. There are about 150 people buried in the cemetery.

The Jewish Photo Library blog featured a visit and an [interview](#) with Sami Cohen in 2015, when he was 67. Cohen, often called “the last Jew of Eritrea,” said he maintains the synagogue, including caring for its two Torah scrolls and Jewish books in the hopes that the Eritrean market will open up, bringing Israeli and Jewish businessmen to the area.

Asmara's Jewish community numbered as many 500 people in the 1950s, made up of Jews who came from Yemen in the late 19th century due to Italian colonial expansion, and by Jews who fled Europe before and during World War II. Some Jews left Eritrea when Israel became a state, and others left when Eritrea's 30-year-long fight for independence from Ethiopia reached Asmara. By 1975 the community had shrunk to 150 and by 1993 when Eritrea gained independence Cohen was one of the only Jews left.

Cohen's wife and children left in the late 1990s. He divides his time between Rome, Tel Aviv and Asmara, according to the blog. Though he was born in Eritrea, Cohen also retains British citizenship.
